

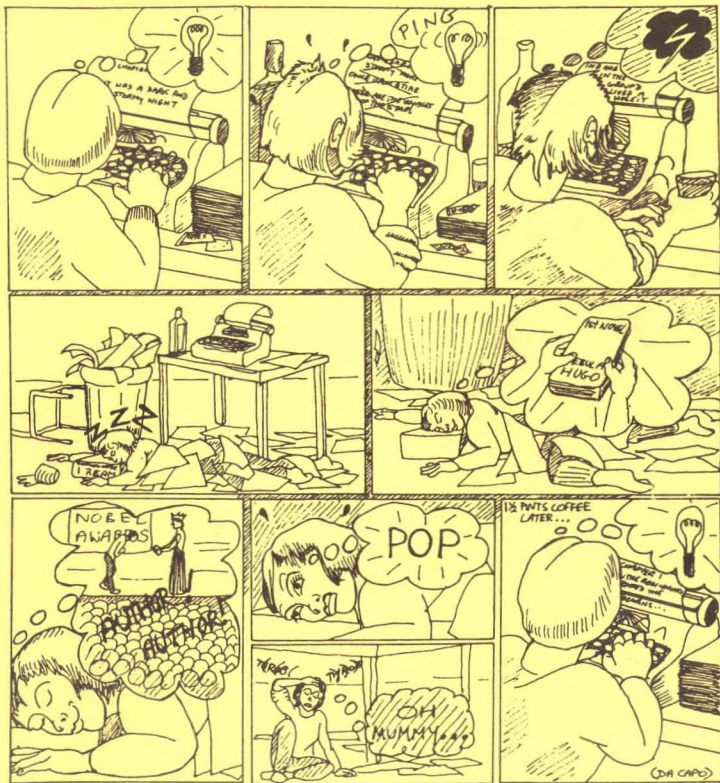
# FOCUS

AN S.F. WRITERS' MAGAZINE

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General correspondence should be addressed to the Chairman: Alan Dorey, 22 Summerfield Drive, Middleton, Lancs. M24 2WW

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### ART CREDITS THIS ISSUE

Cover and pp 7, 15, 23, 29    Ros Calverley  
Bernard Smith p 4  
Davy Francis pp 37, 38, 39

DEADLINE for receipt of submissions for next issue:  
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# Editorial:

## Getting Started

It seems that FOCUS, like Dr Who, is one of those institutions designed to survive a regular change of appearance and personality. We, the new editors of FOCUS, greet you, the new readers, and in this issue a particular welcome is extended to all of you who are inexperienced, new, beginner writers. As previous issues of FOCUS have concentrated on the more advanced and professional people among us, perhaps it's about time we looked at the sharp end of writing, the end I suspect most of us are familiar with. If you write, FOCUS is here for you. We want to hear from you. What would you like to see in the next issue? An article dealing with a particular problem of yours? Tell us, and we'll try to arrange it. More contact with other struggling writers? Ask Dorothy about ORBITER. Fiction?

Ah, fiction. It was my firm intention to have at least two pieces of fiction in every issue of FOCUS. What happened? No submissions, that's what happened. Or rather three submissions in six months; two to Dorothy, of which she selected one, and one to me, which turned out to be a simultaneous submission to another mag, otherwise I would have used it. I feel annoyed about this, very annoyed. People complain that the BSFA doesn't do enough for writers, and then don't even bother sending their stories to the BSFA's outlet for fiction writing... Grrr... The remedy lies in your hands. If you want to see fiction in FOCUS, how about sending us some???

Next comes the standard warning about Vanity Publishing. Several articles in this issue of FOCUS talk about paying to see your work published. Putting money into an amateur activity is not the same as paying a vanity press to flatter your ego by printing unsaleable work. BUT if you are asked for money by an organisation you MUST make sure that you know what you are paying for.

I've received a number of letters to FOCUS asking about word processors and typewriters, posing such burning questions as:  
Is it true that publishers do not like dot matrix printed manuscript?

How much easier/harder/different is it to edit text on a word processor instead of by scribbling on a handwritten or typed draft?

What typewriters have nice typefaces?

It's all very well saving a letter, but can I keep my 750 000 word epic on computer, and what happens if there's a power cut? And what do I do if I suddenly decide I want version 2 of a scene, not version 5? If it was on paper, I could fish it out from the waste paper basket....

I hope to include answers to some or all of these questions in the next issue, but meanwhile, some of you may be interested to know that most of this issue was typed up on an Adler Gabriele 8008 L, which is a fancy (borrowed) electric typewriter with a selfcorrection facility, making it easy to produce beautiful clean copy. Margaret Hall's article was produced on her word processor, a BBC model B microcomputer with a VIEW wordprocessor chip, and a Smith-Corona TP-1 printer (you can tell the article's been wordprocessed because it has a justified right-hand margin).

I'd like to extend an open invitation to writers: if you use an intelligent typewriter, or a word processor, or some other piece of equipment you think the readers of FOCUS might be interested in, send me a short piece of copy produced on your device and I'll print it in the next issue. Then people can compare typefaces, software, etc themselves...

Finally, it must be stated that the opinions expressed in these pages are those of the individual contributors, and not necessarily those of either the editors or the BSFA except where otherwise noted. All the typing errors, however, are mine.

**Bernard Smith**

# Guiding the Dream

*Writing is nothing more than a guided dream*

JORGE LOUIS BORGES



In May 1982, the Cassandra Science Fiction Circle was established in Northampton to cater for all those interested in the subject on an adult level, with an accent on the creative side. Despite this being made clear in all the publicity, we still continued to be the object of interest of those who were heavily into model rocket ships and trying to get hold of Mekon posters. In order to prevent the group degenerating into a play group for adults, it was changed to a Workshop strictly for those who wanted to create their own science fiction and not necessarily live in that created by others. The initial result was flack from both sides; those who thought we existed to provide videos of Buck Rogers went away very disillusioned, those who were genuinely interested in the adult and creative side of the subject assumed that we were another 'SF club' and didn't come near. The membership dropped to a grand total of four stalwarts who decided to make the thing work no matter what it took, or go down screaming. Well, we certainly haven't gone down -- although we often feel like screaming.

It was decided that the best thing to do was to produce something tangible that would explain what we were about far better than any amount of publicity sheets or radio interviews. In May 1983, we produced the first issue of Cassandra Anthology. It was the result of a borrowed typewriter, a sympathetic printer, long hours, eyestrain, last minute panics etc -- all the standard ingredients of the amateur magazine. Somehow, it worked and was received reasonably well by booksellers, the general readership and others who bothered to read it all the way through. Apart from proving that amateur SF writers are capable of producing something decent, it also provided a central focus around which the group could work, a standard to be maintained and also that necessary headache -- a deadline. The anthology is now published quarterly, issue five is being produced and half the material for issue six is sitting in my IN tray. From having the initial problem of getting enough good material to fill it, we now have to work out how to fit it all in.

So, taking into account all this talk of no talent among amateur writers, what happened? It isn't because we have money to throw around. To be sure, we have a bit in the bank 'for emergencies', but considering such things as printing costs, this could be the

equivalent of buckling the seat belt when the wings of the plane have just dropped off. Organization? We make the Charge of the Light Brigade look like the Israeli raid on Entebbe. Perhaps you can work out the answer yourself when you've finished reading this article.

What, basically we are trying to do is build a bridge between the writer in the garret and the publisher in his ivory tower. We want to build a creative environment for the writer that will provide them with constructive criticism, not an exercise in intellectual snobbery. When going through a submission, we always keep two things in mind: a sense that we are writing on behalf of a wider reading public, not telling you what to write in order to please us and that to put something in print that we would not have the guts to say to the author's face is the first step in the descent from genuine, honest analysis to destructive abuse. The whole concept of 'tearing work apart' is, in our view, nothing more than the excuse for a destructive ego trip. It does no good to abuse or deride a writer who is taking the initial steps at a complex and difficult art form. And when it comes from those who have little or no talent for prose writing themselves, I am reminded of J.B. Priestly's description of politicians -- 'A number of anxious dwarfs trying to grill a whale'. One fresh idea or gem of descriptive prose in the story being torn apart is worth more to SF than any number of rabid dwarfs.

We print work that is, in our opinion, of a good enough standard to be read -- not simply because it was done by an amateur. We don't regard ourselves as the last refuge of the untalented -- a guarantee of publication without effort. If you want your work in Cassandra, you'll have to put in the hours. We do not subscribe to the myopic view that any work of a decent standard will find its way onto the commercial bookshelves. Not everyone who puts pen to paper dreams of making a living as a full time pro or even getting paid. There are still those, thank God, who write for the love of it and a desire to share an idea with someone else who may appreciate it. Plenty of artists have pictures hung, knowing they will never sell to a professional dealer, simply in order to have them seen. The same criteria apply to a writer, and to read only what is found between glossy covers is simply to abandon all personal judgement and let the publisher's accountant do your thinking for you.

So, what's in it for you? First off, it may clarify things to tell you what you WON'T get. Free lessons in basic grammar, how to spell, where to put commas etc. That's why you went to school, so if you didn't bother to learn it then it's up to you to put in the hours and get it right. You won't get a five line put down that tells you nothing except that the person who wrote it is lacking in basic courtesy and concerned only with what they like. No lecture in what the public wants and what you must

do to please us, no instruction that time-travel is 'out' and hard tech is 'in'. Manuscripts are rejected if they don't come up to what we consider to be a certain literary standard, not because the subject matter is not 'in vogue'. And what WILL you get? A cool analysis of the work based on a lot of thought and all the experience we can muster. We'll try and point out where you're going wrong and suggest alternatives. We shall do our best to give you help where needed, nudging you in the right direction. But remember, we expect to receive something that has been worked on (and typed) not jottings on a notepad that we are expected to turn into a story. With regard to what is and is not classed as SF we try to be as open and flexible as possible -- but beware of trying to use SF as an all purpose category for miscellaneous ramblings and the contemplation of pseudo-intellectual navels. We may not stoop to abuse, but that does not mean that we won't send you away with a flea in your ear the size of a football if you try that one on us! You'll get a pretty good chance of being published, and quite quickly. Contrary to some dearly held opinions, we've found that this doesn't lead to sloppy, careless writing but a desire to make damn sure that previous faults are corrected and the work is up to standard. The knowledge is there that you are going into print, on to the bookshelves and into the Science Fiction Foundation library. These anthologies end up in all manner of places -- screw up and you can't shrug and put it back in the drawer. We aren't acting as a permanent safety net, and know that learning to write is a bit like learning to swim -- one day you have to let go of the side. There is no selfishness in Cassandra -- ideas are hurled around like custard pies in a Chaplin film. If someone has an idea that they don't intend to use -- or think someone else can handle better -- they are usually happy to hand it on. It's no good keeping a potential story imprisoned in the drawer or in your head. We're concerned with getting black on white not pandering to artistic temperament and little jealousies.

Manuscripts are read as soon as possible and the author contacted likewise. If there is likely to be a delay you'll be contacted and told, we don't believe in keeping people hanging around wondering if their work has been lost. All work is copyrighted on behalf of the author, and the person concerned will receive a personal copyright form with a detailed explanation of our system and where they stand.

We encourage members to contact each other and give comment on the works published. This not only means that you have (to date) about 35 potential critics within the group. It also means that you will be getting comment from those who have experienced the same trials as yourself -- the tearing up of detailed work, writing on into the night to placate the demon, staring out of the window in the search for unexplored avenues and undiscovered worlds. In short, they've been there -- writer's block,





# FICTION:

## Short the Space Between Friends

### HILARY ROBINSON

I have been delegated to write this account because I am supposed to be 'the literary one'. Cyrus is 'the inventive one' and Faril was -- well, Faril was the firefly, the gossamer-winged spirit that lives for a day, the brief candle in the wind too easily extinguished. He was gentle, humourous, quick-witted, likable and generous, and he's dead.

Faril -- committed suicide. I can't even bring myself to write that down fluently, and the words dry up in my throat and threaten to choke me when I try to say it. The obvious question which follows that bald statement is -- why? Why did he kill himself? And I don't know the answer to that. It distresses me to the point of feeling physically sick that I don't know why. Have you ever had this experience? With old age or prolonged illness you have time to see it coming, but how do you cope with a drowning, a violent accident or a sudden incomprehensible illness? Or a suicide? Do you know what it's like to feel betrayed, hurt and angry? Yes, angry. How could Faril do such a thing? And guilty too, because what we really mean is -- how could he do such a thing to us?

Life had always seemed easy for Faril. He was 'the clever one' and seemed certain of a bright future. He was a natural leader; thorough where Cyrus was impulsive, self-confident where I was shy. There had been nothing in his recent behaviour to indicate undue stress. The shock of his death stunned us.

Everyone was questioned, of course, everyone who knew him, his tutors, his parents, and, naturally, Cyrus and me. What could we tell them? The hardest thing to bear was the look in his parents' eyes, the desperate pleading to be told why he did it, but there was nothing we could say. They thought we should have known, and so we should, for we were closer to him than anyone, even his family. We had grown up together and no-one ever saw one of us without looking around for the other two.

Yet he left us without a word. Not even goodbye, Faril?

I know I'm giving this account badly, starting in the middle and jumping about erratically. If a youngster submitted an essay like this to me I'd mark it down as lacking logical construction. But I can't be logical about what Faril did.

There is a couplet from a poem of his --

"Long is the distance between strangers,

Short the space between friends."

I used to think that was about the three of us. Now -- I don't know.

There is a theory that suicides are acts of aggression aimed at those left behind, but who would Faril have wanted to much? His parents? I don't believe that. Cyrus and me? A close friend's death leaves a black void that nothing fills, even if it's covered over by everyday living most of the time.

I had almost completed my very first week as a lecturer, just finding my feet in the big world, when Cyrus came to the lecture theatre door. The youngsters were leaving and I was gathering up my notes, delighted that I had survived my first few days without making a hash of it. With a sudden start I became aware of Cyrus' eyes looking at me, huge and black in a stark white face. He stood in front of the desk and did not need words to communicate the mood. The notes slipped from my fingers. "What is it?"

"Faril."

We went down to the river.

It was a favourite spot of ours under the laburnum trees. His face was as calm as if he were asleep but he was dead, and had been for some hours. He had carefully prepared a neat pile of laburnum pods and still had one in his hand, so that no-one should be in any doubt about how he died. After the post-mortem, his parents confirmed that he must have done it deliberately. They had always had a beautiful mature laburnum in their garden and from the time he could understand such things, Faril had known it was poisonous. They killed the tree after his death. That was sad. Faril would not have wanted that.

I can still see Cyrus standing on the grass staring down at Faril, his eyes hard and bright. "Why?" he kept saying, "Why?" but no-one could answer him.

His death drew Cyrus and me even closer and we clung to each other in our mutual agony, afraid that whatever had taken Faril would take another, and each feared to be the one left behind. As the terror and pain has eased with the passing of time we have learned to trust one another and to a certain extent we manage to live separate lives, but the dark times can still come and when they do, we talk. And Cyrus talks of building some sort of temporal displacement machine. I don't think he seriously hopes to be able to go back in time and stop Faril; he wants somehow to make contact with him and at least ask him why he did it. That question torments him just as much as it does me.

Today I came to his lab at his invitation, ostensibly to see his latest device for measuring brain activity. I was peering at four or five pens making wobbly lines on graph paper and trying to pretend it meant something to me, when he suddenly said quietly, and with no particular expression, "I think I can do it."

I straightened up slowly. 'It' meant contact Faril. I leaned my forehead against the cool metal casing of one of his machines and waited. He was trying to keep his voice calm but his eyes glittered as if in high fever.

"I have a new idea. I've been studying memory -- and recall --" he was trembling like a leaf in the wind and he turned away. Short is the space between friends, I thought. I know what he wants to do. It probably won't work and he'll be bitterly disappointed. But he won't give up and I can't ask him to.

"I know what you're thinking," he said, his back to me. "You're thinking it's another stupid idea that won't work. But it's based on sound theory this time, Evan. I promise you. It might work. It might. I have to try..."

"I understand, Cyrus," I said quietly. He swung round and we clasped hands. The old fear was back, the despair, the black days where there had been only the two of us against the world. We waited until the terror passed then we drew apart again. He looked up at me with those dark eyes.

"You're willing to try?"

I swallowed hard. "Is it possible?"

He shook his head. "I think so, Evan, I don't know."

Absently he patted the machine he was leaning on. I stepped back in some confusion.

"Is this it?"

He nodded. "Forgive me for going so far without telling you. You've stuck with me in all my attempts so far but I've seen what it does to you when we fail..."

"You wouldn't have gone on without me?" The old fear gripped me.

"No! No, I'd never have done that! Not after what Faril did to us! We two," he said, his voice breaking, "both of us, or neither."

I turned my head away. We were both too close to tears to talk calmly about it. He busied himself with adjusting a few knobs on the machine and I took a deep breath that shuddered more than I intended. My heart was racing. I was caught up once more in one of Cyrus' stupid, crazy, wonderful experiments to try to contact Faril and I could no more walk out on it than I could deny breathing.

"What do you want me to do?"

He smiled, a bitter twist of a smile. He never doubted me. "Sit here." On the bench were two oscilloscopes and each had a chair in front of it. I sat down and looked at the dark, green screen. I knew nothing about oscilloscopes.

"What do I do?"

He slapped a file pad and a pen down in front of me. "You're the literary one. Write down what this is all about." He glanced at me sideways. "You know why, don't you?"

Yes, I knew why. He wanted a record left behind in case the experiment went wrong and somehow harmed us. He would not

have anyone think that we would do what Faril did. So I started this account. When I got to this point he said casually, too casually, "It will all be in your mind."

"What will?"

"Our contact with Faril."

"You mean we won't be travelling back in time?"

"No."

I should have felt relief at this but all I felt was the cold fear in my stomach. He put a small electrode on each side of my head.

"The oscilloscopes will show your brain pattern in delta waves. Over that will be mine. We have to synchronise the two, and then --"

"How?"

"Biofeedback."

"Oh."

"Don't you worry about that. I'll do most of that."

Then, after we've done it, I will superimpose Faril's pattern."

"Where would you get that from?"

"I synthesised it from the video we made the year we went to that summer school. Umm -- that's the weakest part of the experiment. But if it's a fair match we should have communication. Our rapport was very strong once."

He stuck electrodes on himself, sat in front of the other oscilloscope and switched them both on. "Now don't talk any more. Just concentrate on Faril as you last saw him."

"Dead?" I protested.

"Yes. Shush. Do exactly as I tell you and don't think independantly."

I gave my free will to Cyrus, a thing I would have done for no other mortal.

Except Faril.

The lights dimmed and I watched the pattern on the screen dance. It was joined by another which danced to a different tune but I ignored them and thought of Faril, lying dead on the grass. I focused on the pale, still face. I could see such fine detail, individual blades of grass by his head, his long brown eyelashes and slightly parted lips, even the clamminess of his skin. It was so real, as if I could reach out and touch his face. I could even smell the grass.

"Faril..." Cyrus said quietly. My heart lurched. "Faril, we want to speak to you."

I felt my head contracting, squeezing in on itself as if the two electrodes were trying to meet in the middle. The pain was excruciating.

"Faril," Cyrus said urgently. "Speak to us!"

A voice whispered into my mind, a weak voice, broken, tired, Faril's.

"Leave me..."

"Faril!" Cyrus called. "Speak to us! Look at us!"

"No... no..." The face began to change. It aged. No life returned to it as I had begun to hope, but instead the colour faded and it became waxen, the eyelashes like thread.

"Go... go..." Faril's voice pleaded.

"Faril, why did you do it?" Cyrus cried. "Why did you leave us?"

"Don't... remember me... like this..." The skin pulled tight against the bones, stretched thin, and the eyes sank into their sockets. There was a strong odour of dampness and decay. Faril gave a desperate cry.

"I have never left you! Don't see me... like this!" Break contact! Cyrus... oh Evan, please... make him let go!" The face began to decay. I gave a cry of despair I was not aware of forming and something seemed to explode inside my head.

I came round feeling dizzy and sick. I was lying on the floor. Cyrus floated into hazy vision. "Evan? Evan!"

I felt his arm round me. "I thought I'd killed you," he said in an odd voice.

"I'm not going without you," I said stupidly.

He gave a short laugh. "Can you stand?" He helped me up and I staggered to the chair. The electrodes had been removed or torn from my head and the oscilloscopes were switched off.

"Did I -- end it?"

"Yes. But I'm glad you did. He wanted us to. Can you imagine what we'd have seen if --"

"Yes," I said quickly. I didn't want to picture what Faril's face must be like by now. Cyrus went over to a wall cupboard and took out a small bottle and two odd glasses.

"He was right. We must remember him as he was." He spoke strongly but the hand that poured the brandy shook noticeably. "You realise we may never know why he did it?"

I nodded.

"Can you live with that?" He handed me a glass.

I turned it round, looking at the rich amber liquid.

"Perhaps there are worse alternatives." It was the first time I had considered that there could be something worse than not knowing. I glanced up at his worried face and raised the glass a little.

He smiled. "Faril," he said.

"Faril," I repeated.

It is true.

He has never left us.

## Second Thoughts:

DAVE LANGFORD

As cosmic-minded visionaries of the future, it's healthful for us -- once in a while -- to reappraise established book and authors. You wouldn't believe the number of Piers Anthony unreadables I've acquired in hope of another Cthon, another Macroscope, even another Prosth Plus... This applies to reference works too: for ages I toddled along with the 1976 Concise Oxford Dictionary, secure in the knowledge that at least it included the word fanzine and defined it right, but now the 1983 Chambers goes further to include fandom as well, while the much-touted, computer-set, space-age Collins (1979) makes no mention of either. (Credit where credit's due, my 1979 Webster's Unabridged has both: take another bow, American culture.)

The reference work at which I've just been taking a cold second look is the book for writers, the one we instinctively recommend to the aspirant, the one officially approved by the Society of Authors: the Writers' and Artists' Yearbook 1984, 77th edition of an "indispensable handbook for writers" (A & C Black, 510pp, £4.50). And though its coverage of British publishers is more or less OK, I come more and more to think that this respected institution deserves a swift kick in the rear.

What do we, as SF fans, look for in the famous tome? First, a quick perfunctory glance to confirm that Britain's only SF magazine is duly listed... oh dear, no, there is no mention of Interzone. Have a look under the classified index for short-story markets: again no Interzone, but here and in the main listing we do find Ad Astra, which died the death in 1981. (Isn't Vole dead too? It's listed just the same.) We do not find Practical Computing at the back under fiction, despite

an apparent awareness in the magazine listing that PC does at least exist and publishes short stories -- usually SF -- featuring computers. Granta, Penthouse, Mayfair, The Fiction Magazine and others are similarly acknowledged as existing but not, in the classified index, as publishing fiction. A number of widely distributed magazines are simply not mentioned at all: from my own pet markets I note Knave (occasional humorous SF between the tit pictures) and the games-oriented thingies Imagine (short fiction every issue, invariably SF or fantasy) and White Dwarf (occasional short fiction, and every month the supremely wonderful Langford SF review column).

The number of computer magazines likewise omitted is truly boggling. There are millions of the wretched things, as we all know, swarming over the newsstands and displacing everything we're actually looking for... only according to this up-to-the-minute 1984 edition of the Yearbook there are only four. (Computing, Computing Today, Practical Computing and Your Computer, if you really must know. Three different ones, Which Micro?, Microcomputer Printout and Personal Computer World, are recommended as being "reasonably accessible" in the Yearbook article on word-processing, yet don't merit entries in the magazine list.)

Now admittedly there is a caveat in the Yearbook introduction. "Many journals do not appear in our lists because the market they offer for the freelance writer is either too small, or too specialised, or both." This is presumably why there are only four computer mags, along with eight devoted to stamp collection, and twenty-seven under "Health, Medicine and Nursing", and the thirty-four publications for the blind. As for markets which are "too small" in financial terms, surely no one pays less than did Ad Astra...

I begin to suspect that the Yearbook's editors can't be bothered to keep in touch and do a decent job of all-round updating. So far this is only a suspicion, so let's try a small experiment. From year to year the same old articles on copyright, libel, tax and so on (useful articles, for the most part) are reprinted with minimal editing in each Yearbook. Though, to digress a moment, there's a lack of overall viewpoint: the high-tech article on word-processing comes immediately after one on book production which is still talking about metal type and gives no hint that computer-setting techniques are making proof correcting a whole lot cheaper.

Under "Public Lending Right", the subject of our experiment, there traditionally appears a history of the long-unsuccessful PLR campaign. Thus the 1979 Yearbook's two-page article stops with the defeat of the 1977 PLR bill in Parliament; 1980 adds two paragraphs recording the successful 1979 bill; 1981 has a slightly shorter piece, tactfully edited to remove a bit about vile librarians opposing PLR. By the time of the 1984 edition, though, PLR registration was in full swing. One would expect a completely rewritten article which, like those on tax or copyright, informed writers of all the fiddly details -- how to register, eligibility restrictions, and all that. What one actually gets is the same old article as in 1981 (itself of some venerability), full of dusty historical detail, with



one added paragraph giving the address of the PLR Registrar. It's as though the article on tax were highly informative on -- say -- the period from Morton's Fork to the introduction of VAT, then gave you the Inland Revenue's current address and left it at that.

In short: the Yearbook may well be worth £4.50 as a handy compilation of things like publishers' addresses (I mostly use it for their telephone numbers, since I don't live in London), but its coverage suffers from great holes. Like the British Rail Timetable in the field of transport, it's the most accessible reference to be found; like the BR timetable, though... No need to finish that sentence. (Remind me to use this carefully devised simile next time I automatically recommend the Yearbook to a seeker after Total Literary Enlightenment.) Consult the book by all means, but warily.

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# So You Fancy Yourself as a **WRITER** ?

Nick Lowe



The jangle of a phone slices through your hangover.  
"You're late," says the editor.

"Ndmpgmk."

"With the serial. We go to press in four minutes. You'll have to dictate it over the phone to the compositor. I'll put you through. (Click.)".

"Hang on a --" As your feet hit the floor, you realise you have no idea what happened in the last instalment. Aghast, you rescue it from the cat litter and skip to the last paragraph:

"Ah, good morning," came Dr. Seyton's familiar chuckle as my awareness seeped back. "I expect you will be wondering where you are." He gave an evil laugh. "This time, I think, not even your inventive brain will be able to contrive an escape; which is unfortunate, since a disembodied brain is all that is left of you! This recording is transmitted through an electrode implant, triggered by the increase in electrochemical activity accompanying your return to consciousness." The phantom voice took on an ironic note. "But you will not altogether lack company. In thirty seconds, the door at the other end of your isolation tank will admit my school of exceptionally hungry piranha fish. I trust you will find them sociable, ha-ha. Oh, and do be careful of the needle-sharp skewers lining the sides of the tank... Well, sorry I can't hang around to chat, but you know how nervous I get in an earthquake zone."

There was a surge of insane laughter, and the message ended. Okay smertarse, I told myself bitterly. Get yourself out of this one.

"Ready when you are," says the typesetter.

So You Fancy Yourself as a Writer? began life as a panel quiz for Fenccon two years ago, and was recently exhumed for a BSFA pub meeting. Real and aspiring sf authors were subjected to a gruelling bombardment of challenges to test their mastery of the legendary techniques of genre fiction. Each of the ten rounds addressed itself to a particular (koff) talent, with the quizmaster awarding scores on a highly subjective set of highly arbitrary criteria. In preparing the quiz, we briefed the participants rather fully on the sort of questions to expect in each round, and tried out all the questions in advance on the Jomsobrg writers' workshop, chucking out the ones that proved too hard or not funny enough. But beyond that, the stooges were on their own.

Naturally, it sounds like a recipe for disaster. Not all creative people are performers, and the stress of having (eg) to improvise your disembodied brain out of a tank of piranhas before a live audience should be enough to freeze the mightiest torrent of inspiration up solid. But in fact just the reverse happened. We found, both in live bouts and in playtesting the questions among our local supply of mute Moorcocks, that even the most diffident players fell rapidly into a state of hilarity in which ideas just came spinning out almost without effort. The problem was getting the buggers to shut up.

The reasons for this, of course, are twofold. First, the kind of challenges posed in the quiz are essentially the same sort of exercise you get set in writers' workshops as a recreational warm-up, and it's a species of puzzle you quickly grow used to once you get the idea. But the competitive element also gives it some of the mutual adrenalin high of a giggly jam session tossing ideas about. The results can be absolutely gut-busting, and it's only a shame we didn't tape the answers (feeling, perhaps wrongly, it would put too much psychological pressure on the performers). My thanks and apologies here to the individual and collective brilliance of Chris Evans, Colin Greenland, Steve Knight, Dave Langford, Phil Masters, Joseph Nicholas and Geoff Ryman.

But what you can do is try it yourself: preferably with a gaggle of victims from your local workshop, but all you really need is two people posing each other questions across a pub table, or even one person cycling up the Finchley Road. So, there follows an account of the individual rounds we've used, with, to set you going, authentic questions that have been squirmed over by the mightiest sci-fi brains in the universe. Of course you can coin further rounds of your own; the possibilities extend to the stars and beyond, hem-hem.

1. Hook your reader. Each player in turn is given a noun (eg "cork leg", "ansaphone", "women's prison", "nostril", "wobble-board") and asked to devise on the spur of the moment the opening hook line for a story, not necessarily sf, incorporating the word. (eg: "The death blow to the cocaine-smuggling trade in Cincinnati came when they confiscated Mother's cork leg for the war effort.")

As with most of the rounds, scoring is rather vague, simply awarding credit for snappiness of response, quality of answer, and how much people fall about. But in this particular round you'd obviously score more for answers that wouldn't work with another word. Thus "it was raining ansaphones in Dickinson, North Dakota", or "From the beginning, the aliens showed an abnormal interest in women's prisons", or "From the moment I awoke to find myself in bed beside a seven-foot nostril, I knew this was going to be no ordinary Friday morning" would be comparatively poorer answers than " 'I've got it all figured out,' said Denys. 'The universe is a wobble-board in the hands of God, and we're all of us just the wub-wub-wubs.' "

It goes without saying that you shouldn't make things absurdly difficult by springing words like "myelination", "ecosphere", "quincunx", or impossible abstracts. Ready? Then have a go at:

phlegm  
clingwrap  
moustache  
runner bean  
combination lock  
Playgirl centrefold  
zero gravity massage parlour  
genocide.

2. Bluffing. Perhaps the sf writing skill is so valued as that of making totally stupid ideas sound plausible. In this round, you have to come up with, eg, a new FTL drive, a new time travel gimmick, a new alien mode of reproduction/sex, that sort of thing. The more off the wall the idea, the higher you score! ("The brilliant 21st century physicist and composer Peacehaven demonstrated that each point in the universe has its own resonant harmonic. In order, therefore, to travel to a distant point in the cosmos, all you have to do is hum the right tune. Peacehaven's first Nobel Prize was for proving that if you play the middle eight of 'Stormy Weather' with one note flattened you end up in Peterborough.") So can you devise:

a new psi power  
a new kind of weather  
a new form of entertainment  
a new science fictional disease  
the properties of the new element Fenconium  
an explanation of a planet with an east pole  
a new loophole in the Three Laws of Robotics. (Steve

Knicht: "Unfortunately, R-224X was too stupid to understand them.")

3. Counter-bluffing. A very easy round, as it turns out. All you have to do is invent a definition, a la Call My Bluff but unprepared, for an alien name. What, for example, is a frummigraph? Well, obviously a device used by statisticians on the planet Xxigg to measure the frummic rate, a subtle but ecologically crucial equilibrium in the atmospheric pheromone count that fluctuates with the number of frumm beans consumed in the last fifty hours, and has a powerful influence on the suicide rate, the MLR, and the audience ratings for Synesthe-surround porn shows. And so on. So what about:

fligtitty  
bupascope  
omtattle  
clint  
b (pron. "ub")  
. (pron " ")

4. Padding. This is the one that makes or breaks the hack's career, right? I mean, either you've got it or you haven't, and if you haven't you may as well forget any hope of a secure future with John Spencer & Sons.

The idea is this. Imagine you have a whole page to fill and nothing to fill it with. Well, nothing more than a very simple action, like, say, opening a door, or putting on a shoe, or squeezing a spot... "He grasped the handle, fearing to turn it, not knowing what he would find on the other side. Very slowly, he began to twist the knob in his hand..."

Grown men have been known to chew their own heads off sooner than sit through a round of this. Phil Masters refused to stop until he was given what he felt to be an adequate score, and the audience came close to lynching him. A quizmaster with any sense of compassion for his audience will at least try and minimise their suffering by making the questions as hard as possible, and scoring higher for a smooth, remorseless prolixity than for mere repetition, thesaurising, circumlocution, &c. Even so, you play this one at your own risk. Try padding a description of the following actions:

flushinf a toilet  
checking the time (1)  
peeling a squop-nut  
clenching your teeth  
drawing your blaster  
unzipping your flies  
being instantaneously teleported (2)  
being annihilated in a puff of vapour (3)

(1. Steve Knight: "Fortunately, I was wearing my panstellar interchronometer, which gives me the exact time on six hundred different worlds. I began with the outermost dial..."

2. Colin Greenland: "Time -- stopped." Audience: "No! No!"

3. Joseph Nicholas (who made it a very slow, lingering puff of vapour): "... His teeth hit the ground. One by one..."

5. Gastronomy. Of various ideas we tried out to do with inventing alien cultures and societies, this proved to be much the easiest and most fun. All you have to do is describe the alien dish named, again rather after the manner of Call My Bluff: Betelgeusian squop-nuts, Altairian flatties, blue snoop, great hyperspatial whistling dipple, &c. ("Squop-nuts are small, highly-flavoured gallstones secreted by a native mammal somewhere between a badger and a budgie, and known as a bodgum. A great delicacy, they are customarily served three at a time in an aromatic decoction of syrup and rennet.") Move over, Jack Vance:

bumbum gum  
droolie ropes  
flying lickies  
undulating pudding  
happy-go-lumpies  
counter-revolutionary soup  
hallelujah oycle crabs  
gulge

6. Overdevelopment. Not unrelated to round 2, this. Given a simple idea, you have to eke it out with colourful and gratuitous illustrative amplification. The very first one of these we tried was "Mr Jones was boring". and Anne Warren came up at once with "He was so boring that if you sat him down next to the Great Pyramid, the Great Pyramid would nip off for a cup of tea and a doughnut." Points for quickness, inspiredness, stamina:

Tau Ceti was flat  
the aliens were weird  
it was an unmemorable planet (Joseph Nicholas: "At least, I think it was...")  
sex with a Venusian is embarrassing  
they were a pair of very similar clones  
the Zorgans were not a very intelligent life form  
Martian beer is tasteless  
the universe is big

7. Endings. As a superficially similar challenge to round 1 that actually requires a rather different kind of thinking, you have to use a given noun ("bicycle", "orgasm", "cyst") in the last line of an imaginary story. "His last thought, before the cyst hardened about him, was that he'd forgotten to cancel the milk." Same general rules apply as for round 1. See what you can do with:

snooze button  
laxative  
continental drift  
dud blaster  
posing pouch  
tax demand  
rubber inflatable Messiah

8. Titles. Rather a miscellaneous round of teasers, this: you might be asked to think of a grabby title for a time-travel novel, or an erotic-sounding title for a novel about black holes, or (one we particularly enjoyed finding answers to) a very boring title that would immediately make the browser move on to the next rack... (One exam term six CUSFS fans wrote a novel called Quantum Jump. It was bounced by Robert Hale.) So try these:

the sixth novel in the Dune trilogy  
the last ever Gor book  
a critical monograph on Stephen R. Donaldson  
a snappier title for your manuscript novel The Sex Goblins  
a pornographic novel about artificial intelligence  
the Bible retitled for publication as a Daw book (Colin

Greenland: "The Book of the Mad God")  
....and its prequel

9. With one bound, he was free. This is the one we began with: given a situation you managed to write yourself into at the end of the previous episode, you now have to write yourself out again. Let's say, for example, you have been pushed out of a stratoliner without a parachute and with a man-eating zogwog beast strapped to your groin. He is sedated, but the airstream will revive him in thirty seconds...

Credit should be given for elegance of solution, and for keeping to a minimum the number of gratuitous plot elements you have to write in on top of the donnees. But really outrageous deus ex machina bludgeoning should be rewarded for sheer nerve. So, for example, an ideal solution to the above problem would avoid things like "Just then, I remembered my anti-gravity pills!" or "It looked hopeless; but suddenly I saw the black speck of a heli-car speeding through the ether towards me! It was Benny, somehow free of Dr Seyton's mind control -- but could he possibly get to me in time?"

An adequate, if not very inspired, solution might be: "I twisted my head forward and bit through the zogwog's throat, gagging on the harsh, vinegary zogwog blood. It spasmed and fell still, as I wriggled out of my jacket and fashioned it into a crude hang-glider, steering away from the open rocks towards a soft thicket of foofoo trees. I closed my eyes and braced for the impact..."

But you might just get away with maximum marks for something utterly preposterous. "I was grateful for those tedious months studying zogwog anatomy under Professor Blaekendecker. I drove my finger deep into the furry navel and twisted at the specified angle, and at once the zogwog's intestines billowed out behind it, expanding as they did so into a wide cup-shaped canopy..."

There's a special category of question here called the "one to save for Joseph". The brain-in-a-tank was one such, and the fifth passage below is another. Nuff said.

I yawned and rubbed my eyes. Dozed off on the job again! I thought blearily. Better get back to work, or the Superintendent'll have my balls for breakfast. I'm supposed to get these thrust tubes polished in time for the orbital flight test at 4.51 precisely.

I picked up my dudter and glanced at the section still to be done. I'd worked most of the way up the inside of the Mark I's 400 yards of gleaming exhaust casing: should be finished in another half hour. I looked at my watch.

It said 4.50. As I stared at the display in awful realisation, the 0 changed to a 1. There was a far-off rumbling sound from the mighty thrust engines...

Someone must have bipped me on the head as I came out of the pub, for I awoke in a dimly-lit cabin filled with a hum of strange machinery.

"Welcome aboard," growled a hulking green shape silhouetted against a bank of illuminated displays.

"I've been running the results of your medical examination -- you check out fine. Congratulations."

I rubbed my head. "I'm sorry?"

"You've been conscripted into the Centaurian Navy."

The monster rose from the controls and turned me a slimy grin. "Captain Zgith of Solar Patrol Sector XIV. I'll be your commanding officer for the duration of the present holy war against Cetian aggression and ideological impurity."

I blinked nervously. "You mean I'm going into battle?"

Captain Zgith shook his huge warty head. "Good heavens, no. That's just for the neutron-torpedo fodder. You've been enlisted in the support staff."

"Oh," I said gratefully. "That's a relief."

"Precisely," agreed the Captain. "Personal Relief Services Officer, Third Class." He sighed. "You've no idea how lonely it can get in space on your own..."

He advanced on me, unzipping.

I buckled on my personal teleport pack, and twisted the dials to the setting that I knew so well. Wouldn't Gabrielle be surprised to see me home so soon! My blood throbbed with urgency as I thought of that passionate reunion now only a touch of a button away. With a grin, I turned the last dial to its coordinate, and pushed the TELEPORT switch.

In the instant I did so, I realised my mistake. I'd transposed two digits -- instead of Gabrielle's apartment, I had set the pack to teleport me straight into the centre of the sun!!!

"But Madam likes her servants smooth," the warty little man insisted. "None of those nasty sticking-out bits." He eyed my nose thoughtfully. But that was the least of my anxieties. "Oh, don't worry; we're quite humane." He licked his lips. "I'm told our experts can do the job with just one smooth sweep! Even should you attempt to resist, my slaves here will quickly bring you to... er... submission. Besides, the narco-gas to which you have been subjected not only induces perfect muscular paralysis, as you will have discovered, but also complete willingness to cooperate in this process."

I took out the last robot guard with my blaster, and ran on down the corridor. There was a sinister black door at the end. I shot the lock off, kicked open the door, and ducked back into the passage out of the line of fire.

"At last, Dr Seyton, I have you cornered!" I called out to the room's unseen occupant. "For twelve years



you've eluded me from world to world across eighteen galaxies, but now your evil career has come to an end! You know you can't escape. Your only chance now is to come quietly."

There was no reply. I edged into the room, blaster at the ready.

There was no sign of the Doctor: only a desk in the centre of the room with a single sheet of paper on it. I moved warily forward, and the door swung shut behind me.

I picked up the piece of paper. It said: "By the time you finish reading this, you will be dead."

10. Finally, a challenge the players got to prepare in advance (except Geoff Ryman, who thought that was too easy and made his up on the spot). You may remember Aldiss's "mini-sagas" of a couple of years back: short stories precisely 50 words long. I think what struck everyone most about the results was that they came out "flabby", "overlong", "not punchy enough". So round 10 asks you to write a complete sf story eight words long (the choice of figure found optimal after extensive trials). Colin Greenland's contribution remains definitive:

Aliens disguised as typewriters? I never heard such



# I Often Wonder Why I Write...

Margaret Hall

I often wonder why I write -- usually at two o'clock in the morning when I'm staring blearily at the typewriter, trying to ignore the fact that my contact lenses hurt as my eyelids scrape open and shut. The trouble is, 2 a.m. is the only time I can get any peace. Or 6 a.m. A lot of my first novel was written by getting up incredibly early in the morning. My present novel is being written at odd hours whenever I can get time to sit down with pen and paper or snatch an hour on the word processor. And that's what being an amateur writer is about -- finding or MAKING the time to write. I once met someone who told me quite seriously that he was going to take a year off sometime and write a novel, but that he hadn't got time at the present. He had far fewer commitments than I have, but I thought it might sound rather Holier Than Thou to point out that I, a working mother with two children and a husband to cope with, was already embarking on my second novel, so I kept my mouth shut. If you want to write ENOUGH you will make the time for it.

In some ways though, it was easier for me: I have always written, and so had got into the habit of fitting writing into the interstices of life. Some people start writing when they are very young, others apparently show no interest until much later. As I was one of the former, I had always had to cope with finding the time for my hobby. Even as a seven year old I must have felt short of time, because I remember planning to write my first novel in bed each night, instead of reading. Unfortunately that novel never got past the planning stage because I kept falling asleep... The problem with being a late-comer to writing is that your time is probably already filled with other activities. Which means that you will have to give up something, or cut down on current pastimes to make room for the new hobby. If you're expecting this article to tell you how to write wonderful best sellers in just five minutes a day, then you'd better stop here and go and read something else. If you really want to write, if you really want

to write WELL, then you are going to have to make sacrifices.

So, if you're not already a struggling amateur writer, how do you become one? There comes a point where if you are really going to do something, you have to stop just TALKING about doing it and try it. Instead of telling everyone that some day he was going to write a novel, the young man I met would have done better to buy a packet of paper, settle down one night with a pen or typewriter and make a start. But I suppose that would have meant missing the session at the pub with his friends... See what I mean about having to make sacrifices?

Over the years, from being acquainted with others who also write, I came to the conclusion that the world is full of bloody awful amateur poets (with a very few good ones), rather fewer amateur short story writers, who on average are better than the poets and still fewer amateurs who write novels, though the standard of their writing is generally better still. And I'm not the only one to think that; a professional poet on the radio the other day said much the same thing. The reason for it is simple. It takes only a few minutes to scribble a 'poem' on the back of an envelope, a short story can be written in a couple of hours, but even working flat out in every available moment, it's going to take months or more likely a year or more to write a novel. To write well takes effort, dedication and determination, and though the good poets and the good short story writers will put as much effort into their short creations as the novelists do into their longer works, beginners are often tempted to start with very short stories, because being short they are easy to finish. Unfortunately they are not easy to write WELL, and being able to write well must be the ultimate aim.

Starting early in life does have distinct advantages... When you're eleven you can write as badly as you like and it doesn't matter; no one expects you to produce beautifully polished prose. And did I write badly when I was eleven! But when you're twenty you want to write well immediately. Unfortunately learning to write, like learning to do anything else, cannot be done overnight. No one would expect to be able to pick up a violin and instantly play like Yehudi Menuhin, no one would expect to be able to speak fluent Russian after only one lesson, but people do often expect that their first completed story will be good enough to be published.

There seems to be a rough pattern to becoming a writer. First efforts are usually derivative. In my case it was writing 'Man from U.N.C.L.E.' type spy thriller stories, but even an adult will tend to copy an author whose style they particularly admire. But eventually as skill and confidence increase, writers will find their own style. I personally never thought much about style, preferring to concentrate on getting the story across and developing character. Some like to strive consciously after a

style and will deliberately try different ways of writing, in the same way that teenagers will experiment with different ways of forming letters when they're trying to form an adult handwriting style. Either way, whether you worry about style or not, a style will emerge which suits the writer and the kind of story. But ultimately the only thing that will turn someone into a decent writer is practice. Which is why I end up sitting in front of the typewriter at 2 a.m....

First efforts at writing are best kept secret: all my first efforts were; even though I was only eleven I realised that my stories were not good enough for general consumption. But golden rule number two is NEVER THROW ANYTHING AWAY (number one is of course, NEVER LET THE ONLY COPY OF A STORY OUT OF YOUR HANDS). However awful a story seems: keep it. Sometimes early ideas are good and with growing skill they can be re-worked into good stories. But if for no other reason, it's worth keeping early attempts just to show yourself how much you have improved. If ever I'm feeling down about my writing, I can always get out my juvenile stuff and within minutes I'm convulsed with mirth at the awfulness of it.

However, there is a limit to how long you can write in isolation without beginning to feel that the whole exercise is futile. You might be lucky in having the interest and support of a spouse, or good friend, but beware, people close to you are probably not the best judges of your writing. In fact I am indebted to my brother's scorn and derision -- not that he had even read any of my stories, he just assumed that anything I wrote must be no good -- for it kept me writing, determined to have SOMETHING published SOMEDAY, just to show him. Later my husband took over that role...

Since I left school, I had only one close friend I could share my writing with -- and that was only for two years before she returned to New York. I was then left feeling somewhat isolated, for though we corresponded about our writing, postal charges ruled out sending large MSS to and fro across the Atlantic. In fact I didn't really write anything for a while, until after the birth of my first child. Feeling the need for something more intellectually satisfying than my job and my baby, I unearthed my old files. From then on I became much more serious about my writing. I had spent years messing about, learning slowly -- which having started so young I could afford to do -- but now I ditched the old fantasy novel in favour of better ideas and finally FINISHED my first novel. The sense of achievement was fantastic, but I couldn't find a publisher (just as well really, as I can now make a much better job of the ideas in that novel). Of course I didn't think like that at the time: I felt dismal and for a while I didn't know where to go next with my writing. But then a year or so later, by the time my second child

was about a year old, I discovered the BSFA at the back of the WRITERS' AND ARTISTS' YEARBOOK and decided to join it. I soon heard about ORBITER, though it was another year before I ventured to join a group, because with all my other commitments I was worried that I wouldn't be able to write enough to fulfil the requirements.

Joining an ORBITER group was the best thing I could have done for my writing. It had begun to seem pointless, writing things no one ever saw, and the only stories I'd thought good enough to submit anywhere had all been rejected. But suddenly, instead of feeling isolated, I was part of a group of people who all had the same problems; instead of feeling it was futile to take the trouble to write down the stories that were in my head, there were four other people to read them and make helpful comments. My writing has improved more in the year I've been in ORBITER than in the ten years before that. ORBITER has made me take a more professional attitude to my writing and now I take the trouble to polish every part of my stories, for now I know for certain that at least four people (with eyes like hawks for mistakes and flaws) are going to read them. And far from not being able to write fast enough to have something ready each time the parcel came round, I've become more prolific and stories pass between group members, separately from the parcel, for extra comment.

Since being in an ORBITER group, I've come to the conclusion that feedback is essential if a writer is to develop -- or perhaps it would be more correct to say, develop at a reasonable speed. It is perfectly feasible for someone to perfect their writing in a solitary manner, by comparing their writing with what they read, but it's also very easy for writers to delude themselves into thinking their work is better than it really is and therefore not taking the trouble to improve. The first thing a would-be writer needs to learn is how to READ their own work. Very difficult to do. Because you know what you meant to say, you read it as you envisaged it, even if it ACTUALLY says something completely different. Someone coming to the piece fresh will be able to tell whether you've really managed to say what you meant.

The other aspect of ORBITER is having to write critiques of the stories the rest of the group put in. In fact, I think this helped me even more than reading what the others thought about my stories. Having studied science at university, I'd done no lit. crit. and at first was daunted by having to write something sensible and helpful about the stories that came round in the parcel. Also, the other good thing about an ORBITER group is that everyone's stories are unlike your own. You tend to write the kind of thing you like to read, so all the stories you look at -- your own or those in books and magazines -- are similar in style and content. In a writers' group or workshop, the introspective descriptive writers will suddenly find themselves confronted with

a Ripping Yarn, and likewise, the story tellers who like plot and action will find themselves having to write about a reflective, almost poetic piece. Having to really think about a piece of writing to produce a crit on it, makes you more conscious of the good and bad points in your own work, even without the rest of the group telling you what they are! The help and encouragement that you can get from a writers' group will definitely speed you on the road to becoming a better writer. Besides, it's fun.

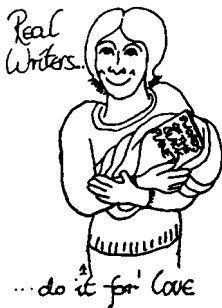
So, if you think you want to be a writer -- have a go! Whether you write straight onto the typewriter, or write first drafts in longhand, it doesn't matter. Experiment. I can't think and type at the same time. My writing becomes stilted and my typing unreadably anagrammatical. I have to write with pen and ink and then type up afterwards. Some need silence in which to write. If I waited for silence, I'd wait till doomsday. Some like music in the background. I write with radio 4 on -- for some reason music intrudes where words don't. It's very rare actually that I'm not writing; though I won't usually have a pen and paper in front of me. I work things out in my head, using every spare minute while I'm doing routine housework, to plan stories. I never sit down to write unless I've got a scene completely worked out. I can't afford to waste precious writing time sitting staring at a blank sheet of paper waiting for inspiration. I do my writing anytime and anywhere: in a corner of the kitchen, in the garden while I keep an eye on the children, furtively in the corner of our factory when I'm supposed to be working but I've just thought of a particularly good phrase...

And why do I do it? Why do I struggle to find time to write? I've given this a lot of thought, knowing that I had to do this article.

At first, when I was a child, my writing was just an extension of my daydreams. I've always indulged in daydreams, as far back as I can remember. Some daydreams seemed better than others, worth preserving and I started to write them down. Later it got more complex than that, but my writing was basically for my own amusement, creating worlds I'd like to visit, people I'd like to know. However I like to share things I enjoy: books and records that have given me pleasure, places I've found beautiful or interesting, and the only way to take someone to the worlds in my head and meet the characters I'd created, was to write them down. I want to be able to write well, so that people will enjoy finding out about my worlds and characters. I want to be published so that more people will be able to read them (and I could do with the money). But even these reasons would not be enough to make me struggle with all the problems if it weren't for the fact that I ENJOY writing. I find it difficult, at times frustrating, but also I can actually get high on writing -- a real intoxication far superior to that produced by alcohol. (Come to

think of it I've heard of 'runner's high' and joggers becoming hooked on the kick they get out of running. Perhaps I'm just a writing junkie.) But also there is a tremendous satisfaction in getting a long-planned scene down on paper as I saw it in my mind's eye. Well almost as I saw it; there's always that gap between the visualisation and the execution -- hence the frustration! Practice and increasing skill can narrow that gap, even if they can never close it completely. And so I work at my writing... Well, that's my attempt at trying to explain why I write. Probably every writer has their own reason for trying to do the impossible -- transfer their thoughts, without distortion or misunderstanding, to another person's mind by the tricky method of symbols on paper -- but I only know that writing is so much a part of my life now, that I can't ever imagine giving up.

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# VULCAN'S SPANNER

-HOW I WROTE A NOVEL BY ACCIDENT

ROS CALVERLEY

I have always wondered how people write. I'm not sure I know any more about how "they" do it than I did six months ago. But since then I have discovered how I write -- or perhaps one way I write. This may have been a useful thing to find out, yet it has been a very odd experience. At times I thought I had gone mad but had been too busy to notice. I tell the story in case there are any others who might find themselves in the same situation...

It was an accident. I started to do one specific thing, as an exercise. The end product was something totally unexpected.

A couple of years ago I noted in my occasional diary that I was going through a "dry spell" when I could not draw. The note says, "No luck for ages now. Time I found a new obsession. I usually draw my current fixation easily and well."

This was quite true. I had gone through times when I could draw nothing but Lovecraftian scenes and figures or nothing but comics ripoffs, to name but two. Times when I could literally think of nothing but the subject of the moment. If I had only stopped to consider that this might be the case in other areas of creativity as well I would have saved myself a lot of trouble.

Right now I am being wise after the event. When I wrote the note I thought my idiosyncrasy applied only to artwork. What was worse, I used to see it in the light of some half-baked notion of "inspiration" à la Robert Graves, so anything started by conscious effort could not possibly be fuelled by the same sort of overwhelming urgency. But then I had never seriously tried to write a work of fiction.



This was not for want of dreaming. In youth I had often thought that it might be rather nice to be a writer. I scribbled, filled a lot of ripped-off school exercise books, never finished anything. Eventually I got discouraged, had other things to worry about, gave up.

The notebooks survived. For my sins I rediscovered them in my parents' attic about a year ago. After reading through them (a highly embarrassing experience) I salvaged what little I could and initiated the Mark Two notebook collection. And I thought I could see where I had gone wrong.

Even as an adolescent I was not too bad at scenario development. Perhaps more surprisingly a few of the projected characters survived the Embarrassment Test. The main reason why all those scribbles had not led to so much as a juvenile short story seemed to be that nowhere, in any notebook or on any piece of discarded computer printout, was there a whole plot. Not once had I succeeded in planning a story from beginning to end.

From the notebooks it was obvious that I had got bogged down in background detail, time and time again. Between the ages of thirteen and fifteen, for instance, I had invented four or five alien or futuristic religions complete with cultures attached, with only the vaguest notions of storyline around them.

This was another clue I missed. At that age religion was a fixation of mine. Under its influence I had written the longest pieces of connected prose I had ever produced.

I decided that if I wanted to write I had first to discover if I was capable of plotting. To invent a scenario for a new story was out of the question (nor did I dare take up one of the old ones) since I thought it would turn into another dead end. My chosen solution was to borrow a background and characters against which I could develop my story. I would keep it simple and shallow and it would be a purely private exercise.

At the time I had no idea that the process had a name--i.e. fan fiction writing. Still less did I suspect that people ever got emotionally involved with others' characters, or obsessed by them...

If I had known all this I would have run a mile rather than start the project. This is not some daft self-discovery epic. I already knew perfectly well that I have obsessive-compulsive tendencies. I have been like this as long as I can remember and there is nothing I can do save use it. I knew that given half a chance some ideas had the power to take over my life for a period of time and I knew of the connection between this trait and some aspects of creativity. But I failed to make the logical connection through to writing.

Also I made the fundamental error of thinking that I could write and remain in some way detached; that I could "just think about the plot" and fail to suspend my own disbelief. And that the process of writing could be divided up in this way into neat little compartments labelled "plot", "characters" and so forth. In other words I was completely ignorant of what writing might involve.

It was amid this muddle of misapprehensions that I decided to write a Star Trek story.

Why Trek? Basically because it was there and I knew a bit about it. When I was young it was one of the few TV shows I watched every week, since it was almost the only SF available in that medium. I had seen both the films, so I knew that efforts had been made to update by losing (for instance) the more blatantly sexist content of the series. The plots were simple. The characters were, so I thought, uncomplicated and therefore easy for a beginner to handle. A TV series also had the advantage of being open-ended; there was less sense of downright plagiarism than there would have been had I borrowed from a book. And because I had never taken the thing seriously anyway, I would not become involved.

It honestly seemed like a good idea at the time.

The first problem was my realisation that I could not remember Star Trek as well as I had thought. I made my second fundamental error. Without some degree of background accuracy, I thought, I could not possibly write a Trek story. I failed to notice that this idea invited a recurrence of the old habit of piling up detail. Since no-one but myself was ever going to read the story, what the heck did it matter if I gave the Security staff the wrong colour uniforms? The problem was, of course, that I would have known that I hadn't bothered. I was starting to become personally involved, although I did not realise it. I read both the film novels (incidentally discovering that Star Trek: The Motion Picture does make some kind of sense -- but only if you have read the novel...) and picked a setting just after the end of STIMP. Thus I could have the updated (less sexist) Trek while retaining all the characters I thought I knew from my youth.

Then I was ready to start. The Enterprise was back at base. The captain and crew would be receiving fresh orders and perhaps taking on new staff.

Third fundamental error coming up. I succumbed to something that felt like a sense of mischief. Three new characters appeared; the weirdest bunch of people I could imagine were collected by good old Captain Kirk. People who wouldn't have appeared in the original Star Trek in a million years. There was a dissident Vulcan and an Earth girl; the latter developed the kind of stage fright that I would have if someone told me to go work on that starship over there and damn well be good at it. And there was Adline Fromm, who is half Vulcan and half Jewish. Looking back it is very odd to think that I did this as a joke.

Because, of course, I had sent myself back to the old square one. The characters were new, they were mine and they were interesting. I liked them. In fact I was very interested indeed by this time, particularly by Adline and by the idea that all Vulcans really shouldn't be so convinced that their planet is the best thing since Plato's Republic; not if they are all individuals. Although these people were invented specifically within the Trek scenario they took on a surprising amount of life of their own. By the time I realised I was putting as much effort into the project as I would have had I been writing

an original story it was too late. Not only was I very interested in the fate of these irremediably Trek oriented characters, I had things for them to do. And the story outline involved concepts that were so unmistakably Trek that they could not be recast; the plagiarism would have been very obvious and by this time I definitely cared about such things. I didn't care if people knew I had written a Star Trek story; what I did not want was for people to say, "Oh, you pinched that..."

I could either stay with Star Trek and see what happened or I could scrap everything and start again. The idea of throwing everything away was too dreadful to contemplate; above all, because I had never before come close to having a real story to tell. I shrugged, told myself it would be good experience, and sat down to write the first draft.

Four hours later I moved again. I was so stiff I could hardly walk. I had finished the draft in one sitting and during the period of writing I had barely been aware of my surroundings. Even so I did not realise what had happened.

At that stage I had the option of leaving the story or of trying to complete it. Naive as I was I knew that writing is not like drawing. A quick read of the draft revealed lapses of logic and lapses of style and grammar; I had, in more than one place, ended three consecutive sentences with the same word - and so on. There were unexplained words and events that would have to be followed up or excised. Further plotlines suggested themselves, as I extrapolated from what I had written. And obviously, the story was no longer short. Characters changed and developed. There was a strong component of psychological horror that I had not dealt with in an adequate manner. For the first time I realised that I had the makings of a novel on my hands.

For a while I tried to forget it and do something else. The exercise seemed completely pointless. I knew that the easy part was over and that with the second draft writing would become hard work. More work, I thought, than the end result could justify. But I did not give up.

There were two reasons for this. First the rationalisation: whatever the subject of the novel it would be excellent practice if I should try to complete it. I had never had such an opportunity before and I did not know when it would happen again. Second, the truth, which came to me gradually over the days when I was trying to make up my mind. During that time I dreamed about Adline. I looked at Plato's Republic and made several pages of notes on the parallels with the known facts about Vulcan society. I tried to draw something -- and found that every time I put pencil to paper I ended up with a person with pointy ears...

I talked to a friend. "Help!" I said. "I've written half a Star Trek novel and now I can't draw anything but Vulcans!"

"Oh no not again," said my helpful friend.

"What?" I really was puzzled.

"You've got another of your 'things'."

Somewhere in the back of my mind a bell rang. My friend was right. I had been there before. All the symptoms were present, from acting like a loony to being embarrassed to actually raise the subject in case anyone else, well, knew... What happens in these cases is that something escapes from my subconscious and then dances around for a while blowing raspberries at the idiot who can't keep her id in order. I subscribe to the Great Buffoon theory of the Universe. To this day I don't know what those dratted Vulcans represent, though I have my suspicions, most of which would be incredibly tedious in this context. But on one level the meaning of this new fixation was quite clear. Even if I wanted to, it was no longer possible for me to give up on the story. The only way I have ever had of laying an obsession to rest -- or, perhaps more appropriately, of exorcising same -- is to get it down on paper. Then I have five minutes' peace -- until the next one arrives, of course.

Once I had realised this I began to get quite excited about the project. If the obsession factor had the same effect on writing as on artwork it was quite likely that I would finish what I had started. And it is quite a boost to think that at twenty-eight and with every reason to think that one is a hopeless case, one might yet write a whole book. I started the second draft. And I stopped pretending that the story was in any sense a joke. At the risk of succumbing at times to my sense of the ridiculous, I began to explore in earnest how the characters I was using (both the usual ones and my own) would act and react to and within their world, and with each other.

At the same time the hard work began. Apart from anything else I had to teach myself to type. My handwriting is illegible and it was plain that sooner or later, I would need outside criticism. I used the second draft as typing practice. This was a good idea; being slow gave me the opportunity to think about every word.

One of the first things I realised was that if I was going to write this story as a real novel about identifiable individuals, I had some responsibility to the characters I had invented. I had given them certain personality traits and certain backgrounds and therefore I could not use them arbitrarily; they had to act within their own limitations and grow (or fail to do so) accordingly. Adline worried me. How on Earth would Federation people react to someone with a background like that and how would she cope?

If reactions to Spock were anything to go by I thought that they would probably see her as quite a freak. I made an interesting discovery. The Star Trek scenario is intrinsically racist. Poor Spock had to put up with unmerciful teasing mainly because of his appearance; I can see little difference between McCoy's "pointy-eared hobgoblin" and the epithet "Black bastard" which, as my brother-in-law could testify, is used by some white people in "fun"; even affectionately. There is little in this world that can make me see more red than does racism. As can be seen from the above I have personal reasons for

this as well as any others. So this discovery was guaranteed to make sure that I would become even more committed to the story. Again with my sense of the ridiculous firmly in check, I developed the book in conscious criticism of racist tendencies.

I found myself imagining all sorts of corollaries. I became convinced that T'Poling had refused to marry Spock because he was a halfbreed. A pack of dissident Vulcans appeared, all objecting to the stereotyped image of their culture. I introduced a real, conscious racist for Kirk to shout at. And so forth. Taking it this seriously I really was lost; my disbelief was suspended from the Empire State. But undeniably, the work was progressing. At a certain price, I was indeed going to finish it.

The price was preoccupation and the suspicion that I was turning into a real trekkie. But because I had adopted that world as my own, as a place in which I could do my own thing, so to speak, I was still avoiding Writers' Guides and other people's fiction both fan and otherwise. I'm not sure even now that I'm interested in anyone's version of Star Trek but my own. This is a very weird situation to be in.

I learned other things than honest dealings with characters. Just the process of writing -- often tiring, sometimes very boring -- was new to me. The avoidance of ambiguity and verbosity; the time to use the long sentence and the time to speak telegraphese; how not to construct two consecutive sentences in the same way: all these things are well known to practiced writers but I didn't know any of them when I started the project. I still make every known stylistic error in a first draft of a scene -- but not, perhaps, as often as I did.

There were other things to learn as well, on a larger scale. The second draft was roundly criticised by one of my tame English graduates for telling two stories which displayed no apparent logical connection. She was quite right and the whole thing was rewritten to correct the fault. And I also discovered, from my own re-reading and from others' remarks that at times I had known in my own mind what was happening -- but had somehow neglected to inform the reader.

This is incredibly easy to do. Most of all when one is writing about "difficult" subjects, like sex. For some reason there is rather a lot of this in the story. So I learned how I might tackle it. I found that I had to force myself to explain, against every residual inhibition of my upbringing. I'm sure it was good for me, but I didn't enjoy it. Thus I learned yet another thing that sounds terribly obvious now: not to introduce plot lines that I didn't really want to follow up... though there was something else. In the past I had never quite believed people who gave accounts of how their characters had started to do or say things that were unplanned or unexpected.

I believe them now.

As time went on I thought that the writing would become a great deal more difficult, largely because I expected the obsessive element to fade away. Finishing would become a matter of sheer hard slog, going through the typescript again and again doing what I had come to call "cleaning up" the grammar or the logic of the story. This happened to a much smaller extent than I had anticipated. It is true that I was very bored

and frustrated at times but these feelings were usually induced by failure to get a crucial scene right at the fifteenth attempt (no exaggeration), or the like. Over the months the original impulsion waxed and waned, but it did not depart.

I am grateful for this in one way. Finishing the book without such a strong motivation would have been very hard. As it was there were numerous occasions when I thought the whole project quite absurd, when I could do nothing for days at a stretch. But it was also worrying. With the end in sight, what on earth would happen next? For this reason I will be eternally grateful to the friend who introduced me to fandom around this time. I had some requests for artwork and the desire to see my work in print even managed to displace the urge to draw Vulcans...

Mercifully the novel is now complete (well, almost; there is just that one piece of psychology that doesn't quite tie up and do I really think a Vulcan can do that and would Kirk have thought... AAARGH!). I am still worried, since I am not sure the exorcism has worked. I went to Forbidden Planet a couple of weeks ago and spent ten minutes looking at a DC Star Trek comic (not the film adaptation but one of the ordinary run; that's far more worrying!). Then I bought it and went home and wrote the longest loc I have ever sent to a comic telling them why I didn't like it and why they were all illogical...

"If it hasn't gone perhaps you should write a sequel," said my extremely helpful friend.

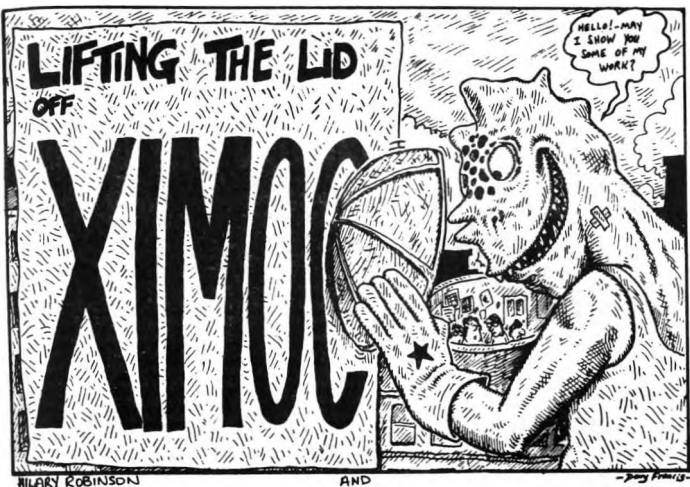
The trouble is that I am tempted. More sweat and sleepless nights over an unsaleable product that I won't even be able to pretend is done for practice; more pictures of pointy-eared aliens... Is there anyone out there with a Trek zine they want illustrating?

Well, as ever I expect it will go away in time. And I do, despite everything, think it was worth it -- though I would never recommend this method of "getting started" to anybody else. Whatever the result I have learned more about the mechanics of writing than I could have done from a dozen correspondence courses on "Writing for Fun and Profit". As computer freaks put it, it's "hands-on experience". There is a self-confidence factor as well, in having finished something to my own satisfaction. The case is not as hopeless as I had thought. If no-one else ever reads it this will remain true.

I am left with a few questions. Above all, it seems that if I am to write I have to be in the same sort of state that I have to be in to produce other creative results. So I suppose... Oh my GAAHD am I going to invite this sort of thing every time I try to write?

And again, what happens if I can't shake the fixation? I may be in more trouble than I know -- or just heading in a direction I had not anticipated. At times I feel like a victim of a highly recondite practical joke (Great Buffoon Theory again). Undoubtedly this episode has changed my life in some way. Because of the continuous commitment, spanning months, this writing has been the biggest spanner in the works of my existence for absolutely ages. A long time ago I named the story Event Horizon: much more appropriate than I realised at the time.

And it could have been worse. It could have been a lot worse. The only other TV series I know at all well is Dr. Who...



MILARY ROBINSON

AND

XIMOC, (pronounced Zimoc), is Northern Ireland's only homegrown fantasy and SF comic. It was started about three years ago by a group of young artists who were interested in drawing comic strips, and who decided to produce a comic of their own as a showcase for their work.

The group usually refers to itself as the merry band of eejits, and if you don't know what an eejit is, you're going to need a universal translator to cope with some of the stories! (One of the stories dealt with the difficulties of translating Belfast dialect into Alpha Centauran, but I digress ... )

From the beginning the comic has always carried at least one text story among the strips, the tale being illustrated to a greater or lesser degree by the artists. This is how I got involved. I saw the first two issues in a bookshop, sent them a story and got sucked in. I used to think (somewhat snootily) that comics were only for kids, or for adults who couldn't read the big words, but I have learned the hard way that comic strip is

regarded as an artform in its own right and just as much a creative medium as printed text or paint.

#### PROBLEMS

Well, everybody has them and for us, number one is money. It costs a fair bit to produce a comic that doesn't look as if it has been knocked up in somebody's back bedroom. Until now, Ximoc has been A4, with a colour cover and using good quality paper. We are considering going down to A5 just to cope with the problem of cost.

The comic is financed by the artists and writers themselves. The production cost is divided by the number of contributors and normally works out at about £10 per person or a bit more. This is where you run into confusion with advice like - "Never pay anyone to publish your stuff. If it's good enough they'll pay you." Well, yes, IF it's good enough. If it's not, but you think that it might be someday if only you had the opportunity to try it out and learn by your mistakes, then it is worth considering doing it yourself.

But it does mean that you must be prepared to put some money into it. After all if your hobby is photography or computers, that costs a fair bit, doesn't it? Our hobby is making marks on paper.

- THE SAUCY SUE -



#### PROBLEM 2 - Distribution.

It's very hard to get news-agents or bookshops to take an amateur publication, even on sale or return. We sell a number through the support of Paul Gravett at Fast Fiction who takes them to Comic Marts for us, and they are also available through the Edinburgh Science Fiction Bookshop, but most we sell by mail order (50p plus A4 sae from 22 Lombard Street, Belfast.)

#### PROBLEM 3 - Contributions

Actually, this has not really been a problem. Although we started off as a local group, we have had work sent from various places in England, in fact Ximoc 8 contains work by three English contributors.

Like all other 'publishers' (!) we receive a mixed bag of material, some of it suitable for us, some not, but because we are in the same boat as the other hopefuls - trying to get started - we do take some time to write what we hope will be a useful reply. We're only amateurs too.

#### Now, the BENEFITS.

One, you get your work published, and nothing encourages writers or artists, like seeing their work in print. (You also see your faults only too clearly!) And of course, you hope other people will see what you can do. One of our early members was Peter Morwood who has just published his first fantasy novel 'The Horse Lord' (envy, jealousy and gnashing of teeth) and Davy Francis, whose illustrations of various Ximoc characters you can see peppering this article, has worked on a BBC (NI) schools programme, and Ivor Lavery has been asked to illustrate a children's book. None of them can yet claim to be able to earn a living from their artwork, but it's being seen.

#### BENEFIT 2.

You learn a lot about how a magazine is laid out, set up and generally prepared for a printer. You learn the importance of black ink on illos, a clean typescript, borders, SAEs and working to a deadline.

#### BENEFIT 3.

It's fun. We meet once a week in the proverbial artist's garret up six flights of stairs in an old building in central Belfast. We read comics and reviews, talk, drink tea, tell jokes and generally recharge our batteries. Oh yes, and we put together a comic once every three or four months.

- THE WASP AFFAIR -





We all know, we aspiring writers in particular, that the hardest thing is to gain experience. There are very few publications willing to take stuff from an unknown contributor, and even those who do often advise a would-be writer that he/she needs more experience at the craft. So where do you get experience? In fanzines and semi-pros like Ximoc. Try them. For anyone wanting to try Ximoc, here is our editorial policy.

1. Strip or text (or both) on the subject of SF or fantasy.

2. No violence for violence sake. If it's an essential part of the story OK but no really gory illos.



3. No sexist stories, no party politics and no four letter words (well, none stronger than damn and hell, anyway!) No porn. (What do you mean, what's left? You're a creative artist, aren't you? Create!)

4. Strips must be drawn in black ink in A4 proportions with half inch borders all round.

4. Text stories should be typed. Unreadable scrawl doesn't stand a chance unless it's absolutely brilliant or hilariously funny and worth getting eyestrain for.

5. Humour is always welcome.

Editorial policies 2 and 3 have grown out of experience. There are scenes in early issues of which we are now (rightly) ashamed.



In return for publication we ask two things of our contributors—pay your share of the cost and try to sell a few copies, at least of the issue YOUR work is in. Surely somebody will buy a magazine with your work in it, even if it's only your Mammy.

#### CONCLUSION.

If you think you have talent but can't find an editor who will recognise it, why not put your money where (you think) your talent is and get into print. The BSFA publications are full of news of fanzines and amateur publishing associations. Don't be scared. Everybody's doing it.

I'll print your story if you'll print mine.

END.



## Market Space:

Dorothy Davies

First the bad news. Spectrum Stories, which I listed last time, is no longer publishing. I expect to find a lot more small press magazines in the Dead List, with the economic climate as it is. So, what is new to tell you about?

Short Story International is a place worth trying. The editor is Sylvia Tankel, the address 6 Seffield Road, Great Neck, NY 11021, USA. They offer the following outlets for writers: Seedling Series, for the 10-13 year old reader, Student Series, for 14-18 year old readers, and Short Story International, a bimonthly for college students and the general adult population. The purpose is greater international understanding through literature. I had a story published in the Student Series, and I can tell you it was immaculately printed, beautifully produced, arrived sealed in polythene, and also featured stories from all around the world. They pay \$25 on publication.

Playgirl Magazine, Ritter/Geller Communications Inc, 3420 Ocean Park Blvd, Santa Monica CA 90405, is aimed at women in the 18-40 age group. Wants contemporary romance, feminist stories and excerpted novels. One for the feminist element out there.

If you can write the short-short, try Channel X, editor Mack Sullivan. PO Box 1275, San Luis Obispo, CA 93406. They prefer the 300-500 word story, with a thought-provoking twist. If you can do this, send it off immediately.

As at the time of preparing this market space, only one faned has responded to my advertisement. So here's the info: Keith A Walker, 6 Vine Street, Greaves, Lancaster, Lancs LA1 4UF is in the (non paying) market for fiction. Max length 5000 words. Reproduction is Xerox. He would prefer material he doesn't have to retype, ie: submit single spaced submissions with an even margin of 1" all round. This doesn't necessarily mean stories won't be edited. No taboos, provided the stories are SF, fantasy, or horror. It can be media related, feminist, serious or amusing. Also poetry and artwork sought. Copy of Mag for payment. If anyone has anything to promote, let me know...

To Dorothy's markets I (Sue) can add some competition news:

L Ron Hubbard is sponsoring a "Writers of the Future Contest" for original works of science fiction of short story or novelet length. Rules are as follows:

1. All entries must be original works of Science Fiction or Fantasy. Plagiarism will result in automatic disqualification.

2. Entries must be either short story length (under 10 000 words) or novelette length (under 17 000 words).

3. Contest is open only to those who have not had professionally published more than three short stories or one novelette.

4. Entries must be typewritten and double spaced. Each entry shall have a cover page with the title of the work, the author's name, address and telephone number, and shall state the length of the work. The MS itself should be titled but the author's name should not appear on it as the judging will be anonymous.

5. Entries should be accompanied by a sae for return of MS. Every MS will be returned.

6. There shall be three cash prizes for each contest: 1st prize of \$1 000; second prize of \$750; and 3rd prize of \$500.

7. There will be six quarterly contests commencing from Jan 1 1984 and ending June 30 1985.

a) Jan 1 - March 31, 1984

b) April 1 - June 30, 1984

c) July 1 - Sept. 30, 1984

d) Oct 1 - Dec 31, 1984

e) Jan 1 - March 31, 1985

f) April 1 - June 30, 1985

To be eligible for a quarterly contest, an entry must be postmarked no later than midnight the last day of the quarter.

8. Only one entry per person per quarter

9. Winners of a quarterly contest are ineligible to participate in further contests.

10. The winners of the quarterly contests will be eligible for trophies and certificates.

11. Should the sponsor of this contest decide to publish an anthology of SF and fantasy works, winners will be contacted regarding their interest in having their MS included.

12. Entries will be judged by a panel of professional authors. Each contest may have a different panel. Entries will not be judged by L. Ron Hubbard or his agents. The judges decision is final.

13. Winners of each contest, together with names of those sitting on the panel of judges for the contest will be published in "To the Stars" newsletter and other science fiction periodicals, after the end of each quarterly contest. Winners will be individually notified of results by mail.

the address for entries is:

Writers' Award Contest  
2210 Wilshire Blvd., #343  
Santa Monica, CA 90403  
USA

Thanks to Colin Greenland for bringing this to my attention.

Other contest news... well, Interzone is currently running two competitions, one for a radical, hard SF story of 8 000 words or less, and one for a story of similar length dealing with the relationship between living beings and their material culture. Closing date for both competitions is Dec 31 1984. For further details see Interzone (which you should all read anyway), whose main editorial address is 124 Osborne Road, Brighton, BN1 6LU. Interzone's fiction selection has not always been to my taste, but if we don't submit to Britain's only speculative fiction magazine, we can't moan about their selection policy... The editorial team are making strenuous efforts to broaden the range of material submitted to them. Get your best story out, and get in there...

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Next issue, there'll be a number of articles on the technology of writing, and also a couple of pieces on the differences between "fan" and "professional" writing by people who've done both, and... do you have something to say about writing? A subject you'd like to know more about? An opinion about the contents of this issue? We're waiting to hear from you...