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FOCUS

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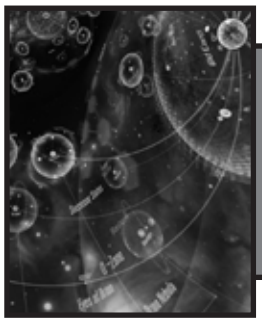

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FOCUS

FOCUS is published twice a year by the British Science Fiction Association. It is a magazine about writing, for writers, and aims to present high quality articles about the art and craft of writing, with a focus on science fiction.

Contributions, ideas and correspondence are always welcome at the contact address below, but please get in touch first if you intend to submit a lengthy article.

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Sarah Newton Says...

"A secret and benevolent society arose to invent a country... After a few years of secret conclaves and premature syntheses it was understood that one generation was not sufficient to give articulate form to a country. They resolved that each of the masters should elect a disciple who would continue his work..."

World-building. Who wouldn't be seduced by the prospect of creating a whole world in conformance with one's desires? In his "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius", the great Jorge Luis Borges presents us with a vast and secret society spanning the whole globe and all of history, with its esoteric mission to describe and delineate an entire fictitious world in as much detail as the one we see about us.

World-building is seductive. Borges understood that – as do all of us who ever put pen to paper to try it for ourselves, or who hungrily devour the world-building delirium of others. What is it? How do we do it? *Why* do we do it? In this issue of *FOCUS*, we try and find out... As Jaine Fenn says in her article on the art of deviating from baseline reality, "We've got the whole universe – no, the multiverse – to play with".

So, with a canvas stretching across an infinity of cosmoses, how do you keep your world-building under control? The articles in this issue all answer that in their own ways. Gaie Sebold discusses how she wrestles with "the shiny" to keep things consistent and believable whether writing fantasy or SF – and highlights how the decisions you make in your world-building today will restrict the choices you'll have tomorrow. Artist and illustrator Jason Juta looks at the same issues from the visual angle, considering how to zero in on how a world or a universe looks to convey a sense of its consistency and realism.

It isn't just about the illusion of reality, of course; good world-building can be your pallet and toolbox for conveying philosophical depth, too. Dev Agarwal analyses how some well-known authors have done just that.

Of course, a credible, interesting, and consistent world doesn't just leap fully-formed from your brow – often it takes painstaking research. Gareth L. Powell considers the place of alt-history in world-building, and how tweaking the parameters of the past or present can provide writers with inspiring and fruitful futures. Robert Harkess looks at the role of artificial intelligence in science-fiction, and how it can profoundly affect world-building; and Ian Sales talks about the hard science-fiction approach, and how he's recently discovered The Secret. I also take a look at the complementary natures of world-building for roleplaying games and fiction – and how all that research you didn't put in your novel can feed endless new stories in roleplaying games.

"How could one do other than submit to Tlön, to the minute and vast evidence of an orderly planet? It is useless to answer that reality is also orderly. Perhaps it is, but in accordance with divine laws – I translate: inhuman laws – which we never quite grasp. Tlön is surely a labyrinth, but it is a labyrinth devised by men, a labyrinth destined to be deciphered by men."

Whatever our motivation, Borges understood that world-building is our attempt to make sense of the world – to present our own theories, articulate our own insights and understanding of what makes the world tick, to find our own way out of the bewildering labyrinth we find ourselves born into. Join us on this most alchemical of quests – undiscovered worlds await...

About our Guest Editor...

Sarah Newton is an RPG and fiction writer, co-owner of Mindjammer Press, and fiction editor of the British Fantasy Society. Her work includes *Mindjammer* (novel and ENnie Award-winning RPG), *The Chronicles of Future Earth*, and *Achtung! Cthulhu*. Her new novel, *The Worm Within*, is out later this year. She lives in a field in Normandy, surrounded by farmyard animals.

The Art of Deviation

by Jaine Fenn

One of the joys of writing in our genre is the chance to indulge ourselves when it comes to world-building. We've got the whole universe – no, the multiverse – to play with.

Despite, or perhaps because of, this unique aspect of SFF we sometimes devote less care to honing our craft in this area than in, say, character and plot development.

It's easy to get carried away. It's also tempting to show off. Throwing in stuff which sounds cool but adds nothing to your story is a tendency referred to in The Turkey City Lexicon as 'Calling a Rabbit A Smeerp'. (If you've not heard of The Turkey City Lexicon may I recommend you google it at your earliest convenience; it's full of things we wish we hadn't done.)

Good world-building isn't about loading your story with excessive otherworldliness and false exoticism. It's about showing just enough deviation.

That statement needs expanding and refining.

Firstly, deviation from what?

Well, baseline reality. The here and now. Even if a reader picks up your book or downloads your flash fiction knowing they are about to read a SFF story, that reader still lives on Earth in the early twenty-first century. (Probably. Best assume they do, anyway.) You need to tell them, ideally in the first sentence, something about the differences they can expect between their world and the one you've set your story in. Fantasy or SF? Current day or future? You can't do it *all* in one sentence of course, and for some sub-genres – a slipstream novel, for example – it may be a page or more before the first signs of deviation occur, but you need to send the right signals from the start.

Take one of the most famous opening lines in late 20th century SF, from William Gibson's *Neuromancer*: 'The sky above the port was the colour of television, tuned to a dead channel.'

Straight off we know we're on a planet (there's a port, and sky); it may well be Earth (the reference to television implies this) and though it could be the here and now, or at least the here and now of the 1980s when the book was written (again; 'television' is a 20th century phenomenon; 'viewscreen' would imply 'the future'), it would not be normal for the sky to look like static. So, something is different here. And the only way to find out what is to read on.

Once you've got your world-building hook, your signal of deviation, where do you go next? Before you put too many more words on the page, you need to know how far your world deviates, and why. Exactly how much you need to know before you get into the business of writing the story is a matter of length, sub-genre and approach.

A short story not set in an existing universe allows the most freedom; the bulk of the world-building may have arrived in your head with the story idea, especially if you're writing hard SF. You can also get away with more 'throwaway' world-building: if you want to get your character across your future city quickly, have her take the fastway; provided you also give the reader enough detail to understand what they're dealing with ('the fastway carriage was crowded tonight') you don't need to explain how a fastway works, whether everyone uses it or even what it looks like – unless, of course, some of the story's action occurs on the fastway.

However, a short story is also limited in length. Limited words means limited opportunities to show deviation, and if your central

Jaine Fenn is the author of the *Hidden Empire* series of far future SF novels, which are published by Gollancz. It has never occurred to her to write anything other than SFF, because every other genre only gives you one world to play with.

idea is inextricably linked to your world-building, you'll need to be especially careful and selective in how you communicate the salient details of your world.

Novels are wider and deeper. For most SFF novels, some world-building will have been carried out before you get the story out onto the page. How much depends on what sort of novel you're looking to write. Secondary world fantasy requires greater deviation than near-future mundane SF; hence, you need to know more about your world before you start.

The form and method of the work to be done also varies: some writers build worlds in their head, some do it on paper. Some do it with snapshot vignettes, some with scientific extrapolation. You'll only find out what works for you by trying a few methods. Personally, I like questions. I use these for character work too, but in world-building the range and variety is huge, everything from 'How is this society governed?' to 'What colour is the sky?' to 'What's the most popular food look and taste like?'

You might be asking a question yourself at this point: does it really matter what snacks people eat? Actually no, unless food is important in the novel; say a particular ingredient's scarcity leads to conflict in getting hold of it, or a minority culture defines part of its identity through this type of food.

Some world-building – like the two examples I've just given – will link into plot, but many of the decisions you make will be set-dressing. And you do need to dress your set … but don't get lost in the scenery. Just enough deviation, not so much that the reader loses sight of what's important.

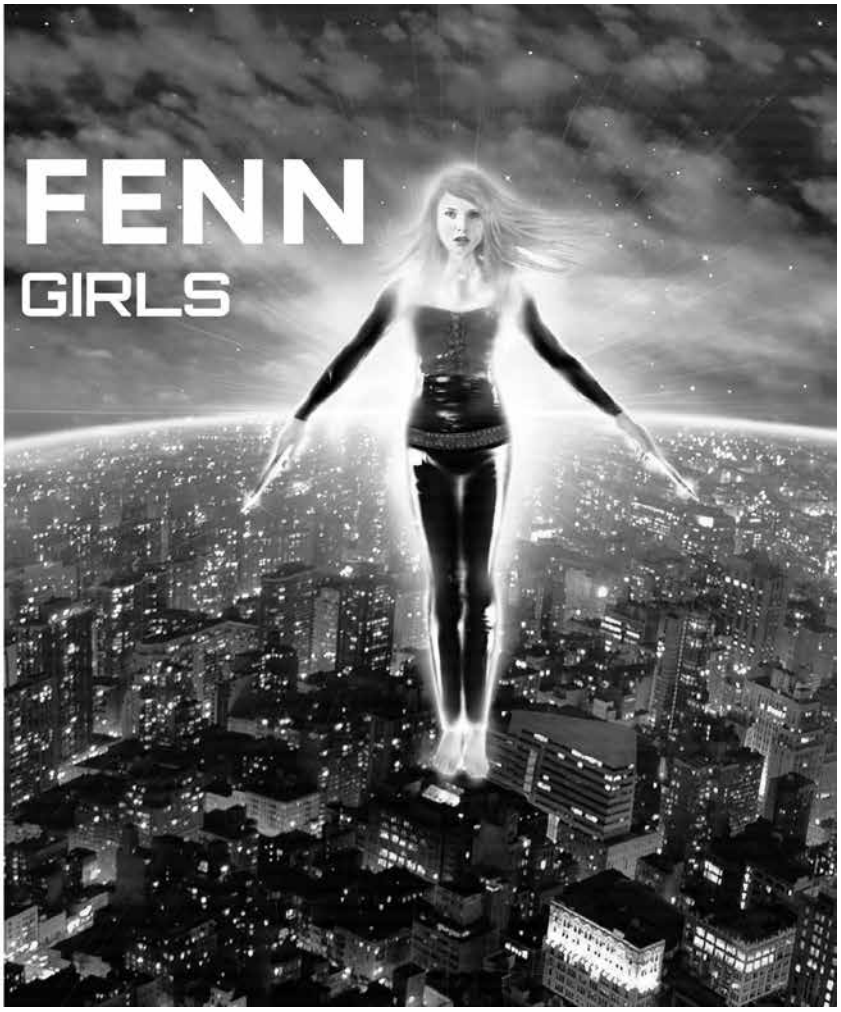
Don't mess with perfectly serviceable scenery either. Some parameters should only be changed if there's a good reason. Time is one of them. Gravity is another. For most stories these things work fine as they are. I've messed with both but in these cases the story *required* deviation from the norm in order to work.

Even if you're a scrupulous planner and thought you'd worked out all major points of plot, character and world-building in advance, aspects of your story will evolve organically as you write. Being more of a 'pantser' than a 'plotter' I believe they should, but you might want to avoid this happening too often through thorough outlining and notes, which is fine. I like that ideas will keep coming, and keep sparking off possible plot developments and challenges for characters. But when this does happen, don't lose your focus.

In a novel-length work which deviates heavily from baseline reality you will occasionally need to ask yourself whether a particular world-building decision aids the story you're telling. If it doesn't, but it adds colour without detracting from contradicting or otherwise throwing into question that story, then go for it. But if you're never even asking that question, maybe you should try.

Related to this, there are a couple of traps here, both unique to our genre.

Firstly, laziness. If there's nothing new under the sun then perhaps there's nothing wrong in tapping into a few easy tropes



('dragons are evil, use one as a threat', 'religious societies breed fanatics', 'medieval style cultures are patriarchies'). If an idea does come that easily, try questioning it, maybe turning it on its head. Try the path less travelled and see where you end up.

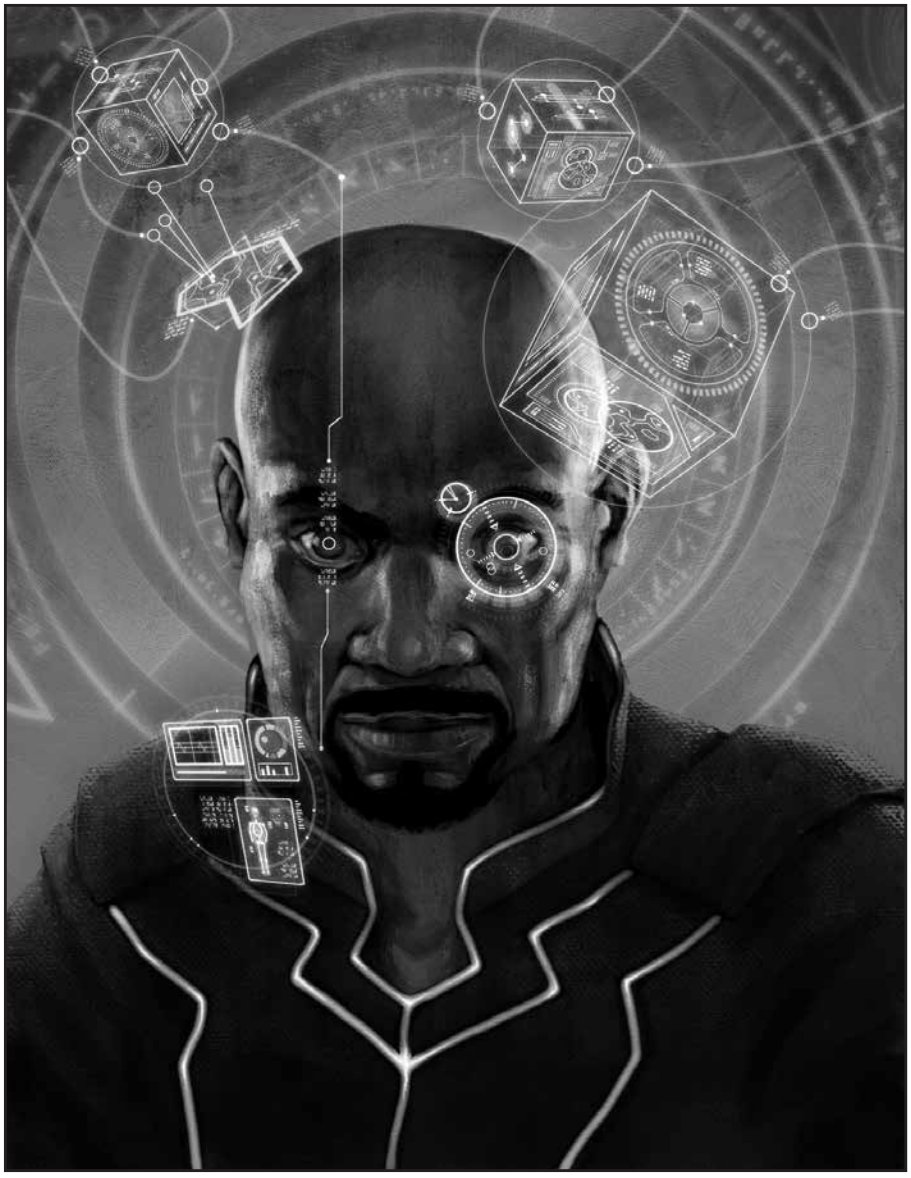
Secondly, not thinking through implications. This is particularly true with scientific and technological decisions ('the setting is a starship but there's no artificial gravity'), or with sociological ones ('caste systems are interesting') or combinations thereof ('let's make genetic modification freely available') . Don't let the desire to include an intriguing idea break your story. Consider what it means not just for the character you're focusing on, but for the world as a whole.

I hardly need repeat the advice about not letting your research show. Just because you found out all there was to know on space elevators whilst researching for your novel doesn't mean the reader wants the full technical spec of the one that finally appears in the book. You already know that, don't you?

Broadening this advice, if a detail adds nothing, why include it? Show *just enough*, not everything. Even if you've got a whole brilliant and original world ready to wow your readers with they'd probably rather you got on with the story. They might appreciate being left to fill in some blanks; we all enjoy feeling that there's more to find out about a world not our own, that it has a depth beyond the simple facts on the page.

As ever, there are exceptions: if the world itself can be seen as a character, as is the case in much of China Mieville's work and was arguably true of my debut novel *Principles of Angels*, then opportunity must be given in the book to show off that world.

However, the usual rules apply in all cases: whatever you need to impart should be shown, not told via indigestible infodumps; trickle your world past your reader, don't drop it on their laps. Pick telling details, sensual or physical if possible, and place them in the narrative with care. Less is more in world-building too.



Another problem in SFF novels is front-loading. You've got all this stuff you need to tell the reader about your world, and it *is* relevant, dammit. You want it there from the start – or as early as possible, at least. You want the setting in place in the reader's head so you can get on with telling the story. There is no easy solution to the problem of front-loading, and avoiding it takes practice. In some cases it's better to accept that your first draft will include numerous world-building details in the first quarter that need to be extracted and redistributed through the remaining three quarters when you come to rewrite.

Writing a series brings its own world-building challenges. The implication of a decision made in the first book may constrain – or inspire – events in a later book. My advice is to make copious and well-ordered notes during the final draft of a book in a series, for use when writing later books. It's a chore at the time but will save you a lot of re-reading later.

As with all writing advice, not everything I've touched on applies to every writer. And I have only touched on this massive subject, sharing a few thoughts on the 'what' and 'why' of world-building; there's a lot more to be said, especially on the 'how'. But if you try to apply the same care and consideration to your world-building as to your characters and plotting, your fiction will benefit from it.

FIN

Building Worlds With Words

by Gaie Sebold

World-building – such a wonderful phrase, isn't it? It sounds terribly *grand*. Like some vast Victorian construction project, looming on the horizon, all riveted steel and carefully laid bricks.

I have to confess that mine really doesn't work like that.

I know other writers pore over the fine detail of landscape and terrain, carefully working out trade routes, climates, borders, resources; complex geo-political structures based on workable premises and interlocking like a fine watch – or towering towards the sky like a great cathedral, engineered to the last gargoyle.

My world-building is rather more like Salisbury cathedral. Build it first, stick a huge great spire on it because it seems like a good idea, then spend the next several hundred years shoring it up and sticking on extra bits so it doesn't all fall down again, because it wasn't originally designed to hold the weight of that tall a spire.

I get attacked by *the shiny*. These are the things that go, 'Write me, I'm cool! I'll be fun!' Like that funky but slightly scary friend in your teens who persuaded you to do things your parents would disapprove of.

When I was writing the first Babylon book I already knew I wanted to put portals in it; portal fantasy has always been a great love of mine. The mirror in *Alice Through The Looking Glass*; the hidden door in the hillside, the stream of blood you must cross to reach the faery kingdom, the pools in C S Lewis's Wood Between the Worlds. The idea of being able, if only you found the right doorway, to move between realities has always fascinated me.

So I made portals. But while I was doing so – *the shiny* struck. Let's not just have one portal – have seven of them! Each with a different style! Each having different types of people travelling through it! And some portals will be permanently open, and some not, and some comparatively safe, and some insanely dangerous… and they work *this* way and if this happens then *this*… it was huge fun. It was one of those ideas that felt magical in its own right.

Unfortunately, it also turned out to mean I had given myself some quite tricky problems in terms of plot. I'd set things up in a certain way, and now I had to ensure I didn't contradict myself. (Also, *sensible* writers probably have concordances. I don't. I have a search function and my fairly appalling memory.)

There were now things I couldn't do, once the first book was published. I'd start something and think – oh, pants, that won't work, will it? Because I've already set up *x*. I had to find alternatives that *did* work, because I couldn't do the thing I originally wanted without tearing a huge hole in something I'd already built.

Of course, a world that is carefully structured beforehand, rather than following a sudden invasion of *the shiny*, has its own rules and limitations.

This is not a bad thing. One of the difficulties in creating a fantasy world is that the more unrealistic it is, the farther from most people's everyday experience, the more some form of grounding is required to give the reader an immersive experience. The brain can only take so much unreality at a time, before going, *I don't believe a word of this*.

There can be many different aspects to this grounding – good

Gaie Sebold's debut novel introduced brothel-owning ex-avatar of sex and war, ***Babylon Steel*** (Solaris, 2012); the sequel, ***Dangerous Gifts***, came out in 2013. ***Shanghai Sparrow***, a steampunk fantasy, is out from Solaris in 2014. She has published short stories and poetry, and had jobs involving archaeology, actors, astronomers, architecture, and art: most of them have also involved proofreading. She now writes, runs writing workshops, grows vegetables, procrastinates to professional standard and occasionally runs around in woods hitting people with latex weapons.

Find out more at: **http://gaiesebold.com/**

Follow the latest scandal and tidbits from the world of Babylon Steel at **http://scalentine.gaiesebold.com/**

characterisation, sharp plotting, injections of ordinary problems among the life/death/world-shattering ones. And world-building. A world that meshes, a world that *feels* as though it works.

I believe consistency (i.e. *not* tearing holes in something you've already built) is an essential aspect of making it work. Get people to accept purple fire-breathing pigs with bronze feet, who live on butternut squash and hibernate for six months of the year? Great. But you'd better not then have a plot twist in the next book that requires one of your fire-breathing pigs to be up and squealing in the middle of the hibernation period, when there's no butternut squash to be had – unless you can come up with a really convincing reason. It may be simpler to find a way to do that plot thing without the pig. Or else you might find yourself having to have an unusually truncated hibernation period and a longer squash-growing season, due to, say, climate change. And you might not have *wanted* to write about climate change, but now you may have to deal with it… or, again, this could be the source of a whole new plotline.

Consistency aside, I don't believe there is any one way of creating a world that feels real (and I make a very specific distinction here between 'feeling real' and 'feeling *realistic*'. A *realistic* world is something I associate with the harder sort of SF, and requires, among other things, an ability to write convincingly about science and technology – something that, with the best of intentions, I personally could not do to save my life).

I think the means for creating a real-seeming world are legion and vary with individual writers and individual books. In some cases the social and political structures are what gives the world its scaffolding, in others the geology and climate, in others the biosphere. Magic systems may or may not be intertwined with these. Some writers do several of them at once with enviable facility.

But world-building alone, however brilliantly done, is not enough. At least, not for me, as either a writer or a reader. And it may be possible to do too much of it.

Because in among that carefully crafted landscape, there must be characters to whom stuff happens. There must be a *story*. World-building without story is an empty house.

(Also, I have known more than one would-be writer spend so much time designing their world that the actual story never got written. That's definitely overdoing it.).

However I think that in finished work, 'how much is too much' is to some extent a matter of taste. Some writers – and readers – love reams of it. They don't just want those geopolitical structures, they want maps and notes and detailed descriptions of magical systems; luscious depictions of landscape and costume, décor and artwork and diplomatic manoeuvring and the precise problems encountered in getting a load of perishable *juko*-fruit across the mountains in high summer.

From my point of view, if there's going to be a detailed description of the tapestry on the wall of the great hall, there should generally be a reason for it, some relevance to the events of the story, however subtle. Whether it's to indicate the relative wealth of the owner of the great hall or the length of time the family's been there, whether the scenes of the tapestry suggest something about the past or foreshadow the future, if more than a few lines are spent on describing it, it should earn its keep.

Of course, my personal style of world-building being what it is, I often put something in and then decide – or realise - what its relevance is later. This can be a joy when I suddenly find a function for something that I really liked – it's as though that particular thing was just waiting to be a catalyst for the right bit of plot.

Since I created Babylon's world as one with many planes, and portals by which all of these planes can be reached, I have the freedom to take her to any sort of place, to create new worlds and new civilisations (ahem) as I go along. The odd thing about this is that I really didn't realise that was what I was doing. I just thought portals were cool. It took someone else to point out how much freedom I'd given myself in terms of where I could take the story. And there have been other much smaller and more specific instances of a particular thing I put in – sometimes a piece of architecture, sometimes a character – because it was that day's *shiny*, which later revealed itself to be massively relevant to an entire plot thread. (I am quite convinced my subconscious knows far more about my plots than I do.)

Of course this tendency to throw in everything as it strikes me has its downside, too. However much I love something, it may well prove to be utterly irrelevant, at which point it has to go – just one more murdered darling. I then have to clean up the hole it left and make sure I haven't still got references to it stuck elsewhere in the plot. This takes time which would probably have been better spent elsewhere – but it seems to be an essential part of the way I work.

And whether I keep it in, or whether it goes to the great cut-file in the sky, world-building is one of the delicious, self-indulgent pleasures of fantasy writing. However much it occasionally makes me swear and beat my head on the screen, I wouldn't want to do without it.

Because I think there is one thing that unites the highest of fantasy with the hardest of SF – it's the capacity it has to take you away. To open the mind to new possibilities, to see a world that's bigger, grander, stranger, wilder – better or worse, but *different*. Different from the walls of the office, the kitchen counter, the piled laundry, the same view from the same train five days a week. A well-built world gives us a break from the mundane, a holiday in another reality.

And despite what those who decry escapism may think, I believe it allows us to come back to the real world refreshed. Kinder? Possibly. Nobler? You never know. But with an expanded perspective? Definitely. And now, more than ever before, that's something the world needs.

FIN

BECOMING A BETTER WRITER...

...in just fifteen minutes!

by Martin McGrath

No. 5 Worldbuilding

Practice might not make your writing perfect but, like any skill, it can certainly help make your writing better. These short exercises are designed to try and help you think critically about what you do when you write. You should be able to complete each exercise in fifteen minutes or so. In this issue, we look at building worlds.

1. *"Geography makes history"*

The way in which the histories of peoples, nations and economies develop is often much to do with the luck of geography. The provision of a safe harbour, a fordable river, the presence of natural resources, convenient ground for a road or a railway, have all, literally, shaped the places we live. Think about where you live. Why is it there? What factors made it grow, or kept it small? How has geography made its history?

2. *Banish monocultures*

One of the most common, and most annoying, traits in science fiction is to create worlds defined by a single essentialist feature. Everyone in a land or planet shares the same religion, the same language, the same philosophy or the same culture – think of Vulcans and Klingons and humans in Star Trek.

This works best in a reasonably cosmopolitan setting, but: sit in a public place. Watch the people go past. What can you deduce about their lifestyle and beliefs from their clothes, speech and appearance? What makes them the same? What makes them different? What might they argue about?

Building A World Fit For A Monkey

by Gareth L. Powell

When I set out to write my novel, *Ack-Ack Macaque*, I decided to set it in a parallel timeline. The catalyst for this decision was a *Guardian* article from 2007, revealing that, according to papers released by the National Archive, Britain and France had discussed the possibility of a political 'merger' in 1956.

In September of that year, France faced economic difficulties at home and an escalating crisis in Suez. In desperation, the French prime minister came to London with an audacious proposition for Sir Anthony Eden: a political and economic union between the United Kingdom and France, with Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II as the new head of the French state.

Now, in our reality, Eden turned him down. But what would have happened if the combined British and French forces in Suez had won that conflict? In our timeline, defeat drove a political wedge between the two countries. Britain became closer to Washington, while France's relationship with the USA soured. If they had somehow managed to win, would that have been enough to drive London and Paris into a political, military and economic union, and if so, what would the world look like today – and what would it look like in 2059, the year in which the novel was set?

It was too intriguing a notion to discard, and I knew I had to use it. I needed an alternate timeline because, in order to tell the story, I needed certain technologies and political conditions that don't exist in our world – and this setting seemed simultaneously close enough to our reality to be familiar, while also removed enough to allow me creative leeway.

In *Ack-Ack Macaque*, Queen Elizabeth II became head of the newly created super-state, and Europe evolved along a slightly different path, with the focus of power being London and Paris, rather than Paris and Berlin, as it is in our world. Rather than a European Union, I postulated a European 'Commonwealth', with Norway and Eire opting to join the United Kingdoms of France and Great Britain.

As I had this all happen in the 1960s, I had to take account of its effect on popular culture. Instead of spending their formative years in Berlin, I placed The Beatles in Paris. The English and French languages started borrowing more and more words and phrases from each other, until a new slang evolved, which I nicknamed 'Franglais'.

I made big changes. Instead of closing the British and French shipbuilding industries – which were struggling as demand for ships fell in the wake of WWII – I had the government of the joint state turn them over to aerospace, with the result that they produced large cargo and passenger airships. These 'skyliners' were propelled by small nuclear-electric engines, which freed the West from much of its reliance on Middle Eastern oil for air travel, and changed the face of international travel from the emerging jet age to a more sedate pace.

There were also smaller alterations to add verisimilitude. For instance, I postulated that the Anglo-French car industry would continue to produce the Citroën HY van and turn it into the workhorse of the United Kingdoms, seeing

Gareth L. Powell is an author based in Bristol. His novel ***Ack-Ack Macaque*** was joint winner of the 2013 BSFA Award. His short stories have featured in ***Interzone*** magazine as well as numerous anthologies. He has written about science fiction for ***The Irish Times*** and ***SFX***, and recently penned a comic strip for ***2000AD***. You can find him on Twitter: **@garethlpowell**

off the challenge of the American Ford Transit to become a symbol of European enterprise.

I also had the tech boom of the 1980s happen in Cambridgeshire's 'Silicon Fen' rather than California's Silicon Valley, under the supervision of scientists such as Clive Sinclair and Alan Turing, leading to the widespread use of 'SincPhones' and 'SincPads' rather than smart phones and iPads.

I set *Ack-Ack Macaque* up as a murder mystery, but I wanted to do more with it than simply solve a crime. I wanted to explore what it meant to be human, through the eyes of a number of characters that were looking at the human condition from the outside. I wanted to look at humanity through the eyes of people who weren't sure whether or not they qualified as 'people'.

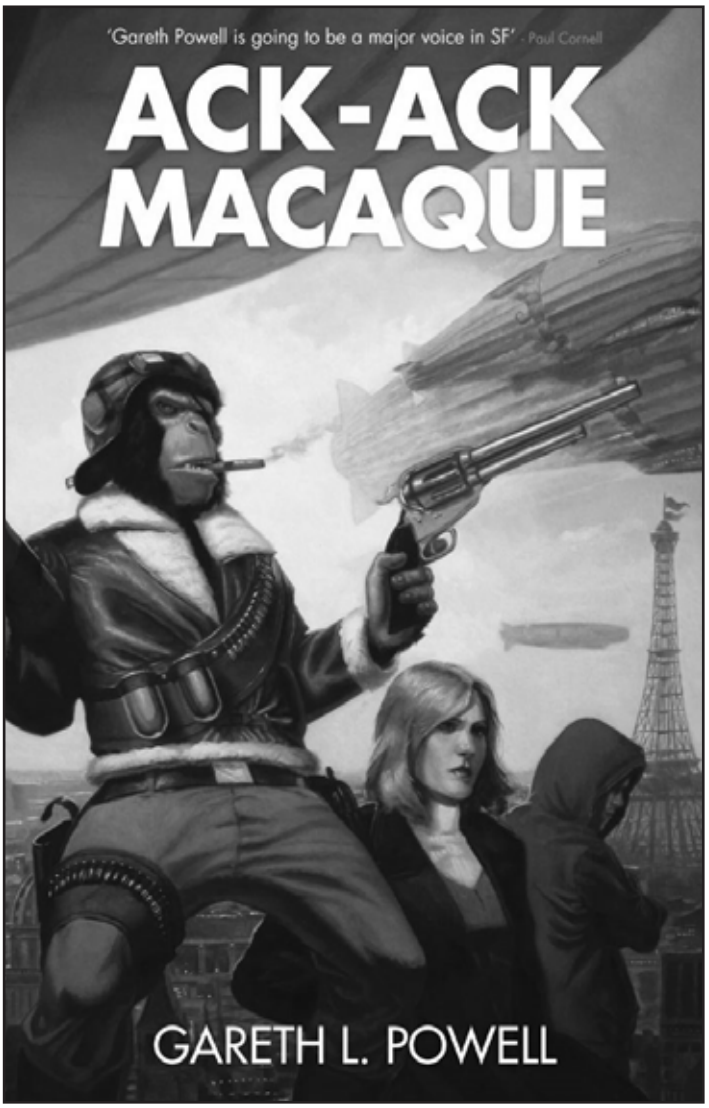
Firstly, I had Victoria Valois, a former journalist who lost her ability to read and write following a head injury and the subsequent replacement of large parts of her damaged brain. As the majority of her consciousness now depended on artificial 'gelware' processors, was she still human?

And what about her ex-husband, Paul? As he's murdered before the story starts, the only way we get to know him is through his 'back-up' – a simulation of his personality based on brain scans. His thoughts and feelings are consistent with the way he remembers thinking and feeling when he was alive – but what is he now? Is he a person or simply a sophisticated recording?

We also have a prince, heir to the British throne, who finds out he's not the man he thought he was, and – of course – the eponymous monkey himself.

Ack-Ack Macaque is a monkey who's been physically altered. He's been enlarged; he's had a voice box implanted in his throat; and he's had his skull stuffed full of artificial processors in order to uplift him to a human-like level of consciousness. When the book opens, he's flying a Spitfire in a version of World War II that may or may not be real.

So, we have four characters: one who used to be human but isn't sure what she is now; one who died and exists only as an electronic ghost; one who thinks he's human but turns out to have an unexpected origin; and one who never was human and didn't know what the hell it was, only that it liked eating bananas and hurting people.



All four are outsiders, alienated from the rest of humanity by the surgery that's made them different; but, over the course of the book (and its two sequels, *Hive Monkey* and *Macaque Attack*), they learn to embrace their limitations and draw strength from their uniqueness. They stop thinking of themselves as victims, and take control of their lives.

I had to change the world in order to create the technology and political conditions needed to tell the story I wanted to tell and, in doing so, I made the backdrop one of the characters. I found a setting I thought would be cool to explore, and followed through as many of its implications as possible.

Much of what I found was interesting and certainly thought-provoking, as all good alternate histories should be, but, rather than get carried away and cram all that research into the book, I decided to be sparing. I was writing an adventure story with a philosophical heart. There was no room for an academic treatise, or page-long info-dumps which would only have bored the reader. Instead, I tried to leave the majority of my world-building unsaid, existing only in the background of the story, with the differences indicated through small details, throwaway one-liners, and the news reports and articles that I slotted between chapters. These articles served a dual purpose, in elaborating on the setting and acting as a kind of Greek chorus to the action in the book, showing the wider political and social consequences of the characters' actions.

The book was a joy to write. In some ways, it almost wrote itself. I always try to write the kind of books that I want to read; and I always try to have as much fun as possible while writing them – so I threw everything I had at the novel.

FIN

The Power of World-building

by Dev Agarwal

World-building at its simplest is about creating a sense of place. In our genre, the writer normally also has to describe the 'rules' that their world operates by. Writers normally utilise a range of methods, from expository info dumps to more unobtrusive 'salting' of key details. Obvious world-building exercises include the setting of Rama, the vast alien spaceship in Clarke's seminal *Rendezvous with Rama*, and the worlds of Tolkien's Middle-earth and Le Guin's *Earthsea*.

Arguably, world-building is not just part of the science fiction writer's business, it *is* the business. It forms the core of SF. In the genre, it might be said to be our obsession. If you're enjoying any story within SF, you're experiencing the writer's world-building. At its most overt a writer may craft a baroque landscape from high fantasy or the far future. On the edge of the genre that takes place in contemporary settings – horror or urban fantasy, for example – we're often lulled into thinking we're experiencing our own world, only to have it twist out of the mundane into something more bizarre. That's world-building too.

Francois Dominic Laramee sums up the challenge as: "The goal of world-building is to create the context for a story. Consistency is an important element, since the world provides a foundation for the action of a story."

The skill is to develop the world without overwhelming the story. Lucius Shepard began his story, 'Shades', with a striking example of world-building:

> *'This little gook cadre with a pitted complexion drove me through the heart of Saigon – I couldn't relate to it as Ho Chi Minh City.'*

This perfect jump into the story immerses us right in the action. As a reader, this is a favourite story of mine. In the very first lines we're in motion, literally as the narrator is being driven, and his voice is immediate – angry and racist. We know where we are – not just in a named city but one with emotional and historical resonance. It's post-Vietnam War Saigon, with the city renamed Ho Chi Minh City by the victorious Communists. The protagonist knew the city as Saigon, and by declaring his resistance to its name change he implicitly rejects the fact that America lost the war.

And we know he's racist with just one carefully chosen word, 'gook'.

Another adage is that characters are the essence of the story. Without characters there is no true story, only events unfolding inside a plot. Another, linked adage is that the landscape can *become* a character in its own right. Just as we move from characters who are prisoners or kings and turn them into the Count of Monte Cristo or Paul Atreides, so landscapes can similarly be wholly realised. If done correctly, a generic fantasy city becomes New Crobuzon, for example, and a desert planet becomes specifically Dune.

Dev Agarwal is a science fiction and fantasy writer.

He also is an editor for Ireland's science fiction magazine, ***Albedo One***. His fiction has appeared in a range of magazines and anthologies in Britain and America. Dev's latest story is 'Blight' in ***Looking Landwards***, published by Newcon Press. Come and say hello in between panels, if you're at LonCON.

In exploring the idea of landscape as a character, we might look at Ursula Le Guin and her series of stories about the planets Werel and Yeowe. Her world-building and shaping of the landscape is so seamless that it almost defies analysis.

In 'Old Music and the Slave Women', Le Guin takes us to Werel, the slave world, at a time of rebellion. The world-building has to work more than one street, first establishing Werel as a slave-world, then describing the effects of the rebellion on it. Her point-of-view character, Esdan, observes Werel from the outsider perspective of an anti-slavery culture. There is a lot going on, just in landscape and context, *before* we get to the plot, yet Le Guin manages to embed her expository details in an entirely accessible fashion. Esdan (known by the titular nickname Old Music) is captured and held prisoner on a plantation. The plantation has fallen into ruin, with many slaves (assets) run off. He sits looking out at the garden, on the Yaramera estate:

> *'The room looked out from the second floor over the gardens of Yaramera, terraced slopes and flowerbeds, walks, lawns, and a series of ornamental lakes and pools that descended gradually to the river: a vast pattern of curves and planes, plants and paths, earth and still water, embraced by the broad living curve of the river… The grass of the terraces had dried to soft gold. The river and the lakes and pools were all the misty blue of the summer sky. The flowerbeds and shrubberies were untended, overgrown, but not yet gone wild. The gardens of Yaramera were utterly beautiful in their desolation. Desolate, forlorn, forsaken, all such romantic words befitted them, yet they were also rational and noble, full of peace. They had been built by the labor slaves. Their dignity and peace were founded on cruelty,*

misery, pain. His mind contained the beauty and the terrible grief of the place, assured that the existence of one cannot justify the other, the destruction of one cannot destroy the other. He was aware of both, only aware.'

Le Guin begins her description with a series of 'factual' observations. The garden is grand but familiar, made up of terraces, flowerbeds and landscaped lakes. Then, running through these details is the essence of what makes it an emotional space. Le Guin describes the once elegant landscape with particular details. Grass has 'dried to soft gold', and the colour of water mirrors the blue of the sky. These are carefully chosen words that resonate with the reader.

We are told that the plantation is built and run by slaves. Esdan reflects on the enslaved labour that created the gardens and then, after the turbulence of the revolt, left them 'utterly beautiful in their desolation'. The gardens' state, either as a place of beauty or ruin, becomes inseparable from their description.

Le Guin moves with deliberate purpose. She imagines what an alien world's slave economy might be like, starting with the artifacts of slave labour – such as Yaramera's garden. She then describes what the estate looks like *after* its heyday, when it's fallen into disrepair, 'forlorn, forsaken, all such romantic words'. Then she reveals the underlying spirit of the estate, 'founded on cruelty, misery, pain', and that life on Werel is inseparable from its slave economy. Le Guin explores the world she's created not just as a physical location, concerned only with its sense of wonder, but as an emotional setting as well.

Le Guin invests such depth in Werel's world-building because of its relevance to our world. The starting point, Le Guin has previously said of Werel, was her visit to a former slave plantation in the American South. Historically, the inhumanity of slavery gave us both the faded splendour of antebellum architecture and the palpable feeling of the suffering endured there. The past was written into the fabric of the place, even centuries later. Therefore, Werel's world-building is directly linked in metaphor to our own planet's historic slavery. The best world-building is more than just physical description, and Le Guin uses it here as a device to explore what it means to be human – either as characters capable of enslaving their fellow humans or as people forever changed by slavery's barbarity.

As Le Guin uses physical location as a jumping off point for emotional exploration, in 'Rag and Bone', British writer Priya Sharma artfully reimagines Liverpool as an entity in its own right.

'I cross Upper Parliament Street into Toxteth. My cart's loaded with a bag of threadbare coloured sheets which I'll sell for second-grade paper. I've a pile of bones that'll go for glue.

'Ra bon! Ra bon!' I shout.

Calls bring the kids who run alongside me. One reaches out to pat Gabriel, my hound, who curls his lip and growls.

'Not a pet, son. Steer clear.'

When I stop, the children squat on the curb to watch. They're still too little for factory work.'

Sharma's Liverpool is a vicious, brutalising world. This is steampunk with a unique slant – what Charles Stross described as the real steampunk space. Stross has attacked the focus of much of steampunk's world-building. We all know the subgenre's aesthetic and the tropes that define it. 'Wealthy aristocrats sipping tea (and) airship smugglers in the weird Wild West.' But the reimagined Victorian world can be built more fully: Stross challenges us to forget these tropes because 'a revisionist mundane SF steampunk epic would… share the empty-stomached anguish of a young prostitute on the streets of a northern town during a recession, unwanted children (contraception is a crime) offloaded on a baby farm with a guaranteed 90% mortality rate through neglect. The casual boiled-beef brutality of the soldiers who take the King's Shilling to break the heads of union members organising for a 60-hour working week. The fading eyesight and mangled fingers of nine year olds forced to labour on steam-powered looms, weaving cloth for the rich.'

While Stross was developing this argument, Sharma separately took on meeting this agenda in her fiction. 'Rag and Bone' might well be seen as the realisation of Stross's criticism of the subgenre, taken as marching orders to construct the dark underbelly of the steampunk moment.

In impressively hard-hitting world-building, Sharma manages to turn steampunk on its head and shake loose the predelictions for Victoriana, anachronisms and the past as a theme park, to come up with a vision far more atypical and arresting. Sharma's narrative voice is indivisible from her world-building, with Tom, the rag-and-bone man, literally hunting bones (and flesh) from the destitute to service the needs of the elite. The rules that Sharma sets for her world go on to define the choices that the protagonists can make. Tom is at the bottom of a ruthless steampunk society. His struggle is in his collision with the forces of wealth and power who take what they want without sanction.

Sharma not only generates the conflict that the drama requires, but also weaves in a narrative that illuminates her world-building. When her characters resist the conventions of their steampunk environment, they reveal more of the world she's created:

'My dad would say, We're free. Never subject to the tyranny of the clock. The dull terrors of the production line. No one will use us as they please.'

In the final act of the story, Sharma takes her subversion to a further level, managing to surprise the reader's expectations as she explores the human cost of being on the lowest rung of Victorian steampunk.

The best world-building creates depth with a lightness of touch. It seduces the reader with its immersive experience, taking us to a place that doesn't exist or giving us a new slant on a place we already know. Like any well-crafted artefact, world-building is more than the sum of its parts. It creates a continuum so rich in detail that it resonates with us, and strengthens our relationship to the characters that inhabit it. World-building is not just at the heart of good writing, it *is* its heart.

FIN

NEWS FROM ORBIT

TERRY JACKMAN, CO-ORDINATOR OF THE BSFA'S ONLINE WRITERS' WORKSHOPS, REPORTS

QUOTE OF THE MONTH

In a recent discussion someone posed the question: What do creative people do more than others? One very prompt answer: Second jobs!

CALLING ALL READERS!

I'd like to compile a Beta List. If anyone isn't familiar with the term that's the name given the kind souls willing to cast a fresh eye over a complete, POLISHED novel draft, after it's been Orbited and revised. Then when someone needs that they can put in a request.

This doesn't need to be a writer. A keen reader is good too. It would involve reading then writing half a page of feedback re. plot, character, setting etc.

If you'd be interested, or know someone who would be, again please contact me.

ANY KINDLE FIRE OWNERS?

When my Sony reader died I got one and wanted to send files, not books, to it. All the immediately visible online info said I needed a USB connection. Odd, I thought, so I asked around, to discover I could simply email a file over. Simples. So why not say that at once?

REVIEWING, AND THE BENEFITS THEREOF, WHICH I CAN PASS ON…

As I write this I seem to have read-and-reviewed 38 novels since the end of 2013; big-bucks publishers, Indie and self-published; established writers and debuts. What they all have a common is they're 'just out'. But after that they rate from a yay! 5 stars to a duh! 1 star, and interestingly it isn't necessarily the big names, or the big publishers, getting the 5 star ratings.

Since I figure I'm not alone in hunting for great reads, or wanting to see what's currently 'hot' in the market [and since I don't review in Vector] I'm putting the best titles plus my incredibly short reviews of them up on my blog when I have a minute. Feel free to check them out and let me know how they strike you.

Look for Terrytalk at ***www.terryjackman.co.uk***

AND WITH THAT IN MIND…

A rant: In a recent email request to Orbiters I mentioned I was on 5 deadlines at the time. These were in fact:

Submissions to read for a magazine editor
A novel edit for a publisher [126,000 words]
The current Orbit round
Reviews for a publisher
The FOCUS deadline
And my own personal writing schedule

Note these do not include 'the day job' or family matters or a series of doctors' appointments.

So, did I meet them? Yes, because I made f***** sure I did. Anything else would have encouraged me to think missing a deadline was excusable.

Bluntly put, it isn't. I learned that when an editor I let down never asked me to write for her again, at a time when I was a pretty hot property in my-then area of non-fiction. But I'm getting the feeling that one or two of us are slipping so I'm saying it right out – don't let it happen. If this applies to you, I'm doing you a favour. You want your writing to succeed? You've joined a group and made a commitment to the rest? Then it's both polite, and professional, to follow through on it. Plus it's the best way I know to train ourselves to drop such amateur habits, before someone out there – we hope – expects us not to be one, then teaches us the hard way?

So if this is you, give it some thought?

For anyone interested in how I approach it - If I can't get my orbit crits back in about a week, and know there's a compelling reason I can't, I apologise for the delay in advance. And set a date. It's incredibly rare I take longer than the first month, if only 'cos I want to be free to go back to writing. And I think the only time I missed a round, even the crits, was when I spent 5 months recovering from major surgery. I don't deliver late if there's ANY way to avoid it.

THE THING THAT MOST ENSURES I CAN'T PUT A BOOK DOWN…

Recently, reviewing 2 new novels in quick succession, I was struck by their similarities, and one big difference. Novel 1 was Victorian era, amoral vampires and a creepy human villain. Novel 2 was Victorian era, Steampunk, with Fae, Chinese and English characters.

Some of you will know I collect different types of vamp stories. And that I'm wary of Steampunk. So why did I love Novel 2 and wasn't turned on by Novel 1?

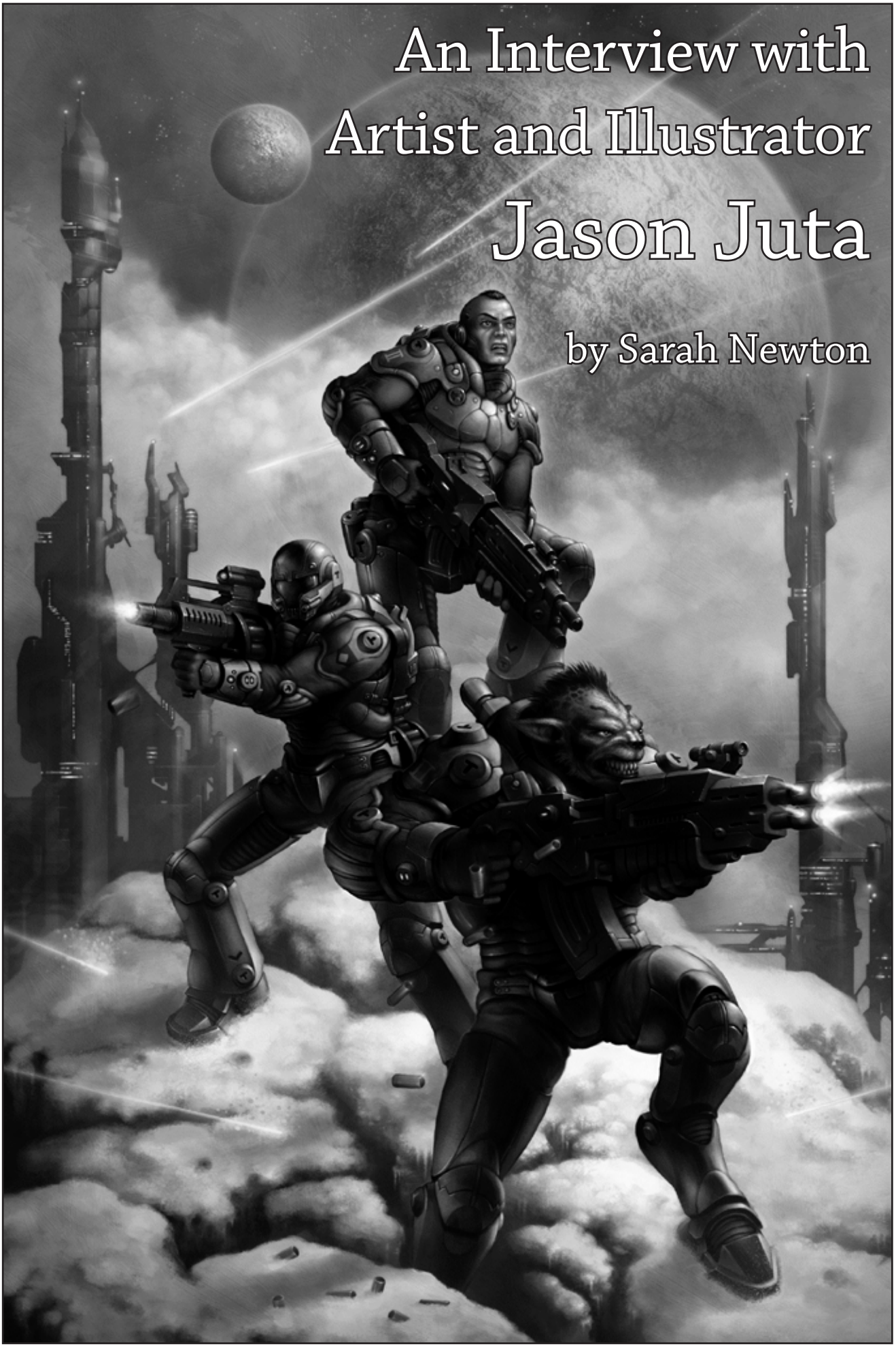
Because 2 had that indefinable plus we call empathy; I cared about the characters. Empathy doesn't have to mean I like them [OK it can help] but that I need to feel for them. Otherwise – you've lost me. I might skim through to see how it ends but I won't fully focus, and I won't be encouraged to read more from that writer? So it's become one of the first questions I ask myself when I read a script, to crit, to edit or review. Just a thought.

CALLING ALL WRITERS

I have someone interested in reforming a playscript group. Is there anyone else who'd be interested? If so please contact me.

An Interview with Artist and Illustrator Jason Juta

by Sarah Newton



Jason Juta is a talented and prolific artist, designer, and illustrator active in the genre space, especially for roleplaying games. He talks to this issue's guest editor Sarah Newton about world-building in his work.

Hi Jason – and thanks for agreeing to be interviewed for FOCUS. Before we get into the details of your world-building approach, perhaps you could tell our readers a little about yourself and your work?

Hi Sarah – thanks for the opportunity. Well, I'm a full-time freelance illustrator. For most of my career I've worked mostly on printed roleplaying games and boardgames, as well as computer games in differing art-related capacities. More recently I've been branching into the historical and young reader fields.

You work in a wide range of genres. Do you have a favourite?

A few years ago I would have said fantasy in all its forms, but currently I'd struggle to choose between fantasy and historical art. The latter requires a great deal of attention to detail and realism which I find rewarding, and which informs the rest of my work.

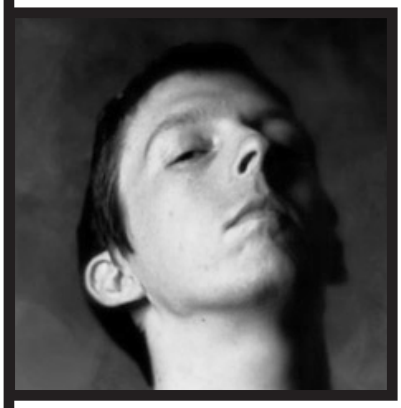
Who would you say are your greatest influences?

I think most artists would struggle with this question and I'm no exception. I think it would be easier to consider various artistic 'encounters' that had an impact on me when I was younger. These would be all those Frazetta covers for Conan, as well as other pulp series like Doc Savage, and any old Paper Tiger artbooks I could find, especially ones about Boris Vallejo.

Comics of all types were a big deal to me growing up. I spent a lengthy amount of time obsessing over Japanese art after encountering Robotech. Jeff Easley and other D&D artists, Giger, the Pre-Raphaelites, N.C.Wyeth, 'old school' British gaming artists like John Blanche, and a lot of others. A bit of a weird melting pot, really!

Our recent work together has been on the *Mindjammer* roleplaying game, which is a far future transhuman science-fiction setting. I was amazed when I saw your work how close it was to how I imagined *Mindjammer*'s "New Commonality of Humankind". How did you approach a job like this – what kind of preparation do you do? What kind of research? How do you choose the feel of the work you're aiming for and its style?

I read a wide variety of books, devour a lot of art, movies, and so on, and watch documentaries on wildly different subjects. I believe that being well-read and having an interest in things like natural history, science, history, and warfare allows an artist



Jason Juta is a freelance illustrator based in the UK. He provides fantasy, historical and young reader artwork for the publishing and gaming industries.

to get a feel for what would be appropriate for particular assignments. Having read plenty of Asimov and Clarke, for example, and grown up with artists like Chris Foss, as well as being interested in current technology and science, gives me a solid artistic grounding for settings like *Mindjammer*.

When you work on a project like *Mindjammer*, where your illustrations are all set in the same world or universe, how do you create that feeling of unity? First, in the abstract – how do you come up with, for example, the technical underpinnings of a science-fiction civilisation – what the buildings look like, what clothes people wear?

It changes on a case-by-case basis, really. Typically, it's important that people understand what they're looking at, especially in things like RPGs, where the visual aspect is important. So if we're depicting an advanced 'classic' space civilisation, especially royalty, upper class environments or military commanders, it will have familiar 'keys', like robes, chrome, smooth contours, and so on. It's wonderful to go mad and do strange original things sometimes, but that doesn't always serve a project well, if readers or players feel alienated from the setting.

Secondly, in the concrete, what's your mechanical process for producing illustrations? Do you do lots of concept roughs to begin with, or do you have a solid 'backbone' for a given genre already in mind when you begin, and work to that?

If there's a lot of repetition of setting elements, I might do design work beforehand to ensure consistency. Some clients like to see a lot of roughs, while others give artists a lot of freedom. When an assignment comes in, the description usually causes an image to pop into my head immediately. If I don't go with it, it still gives a starting point. I'll draw roughly and quickly in Photoshop layers, sometimes blocking in tones to work out the initial composition. In terms of subject matter, the 'backbone' you mentioned is already formed between the client's setting and requirements, and my own background knowledge I mentioned earlier.

Again, concretely, how do you prefer to work – what's your favourite medium for illustration? Has that changed over time?

These days I work pretty much exclusively in Photoshop, with occasional dabblings with other digital tools. It's really a matter of convenience and speed. I more or less taught myself to paint as soon as I had the ability, and tried every medium possible. I never really mastered any as well as I'd like, which is a real regret. I miss painting and ink work quite badly, and wish I had time to get back into it – I definitely will again one day. Painting on the

computer is like eating diet food your whole life, it just doesn't fill the hole somehow!

How do you interact with the genre world yourself? Are you a big movie goer? A video gamer? RPGer? A voracious comic book consumer? All of the above?

It's been my focus for my whole life, really. Comics when I was young, all the weird old fiction and occult books from my dad's vast library; any fantasy movies or TV that I could get my hands on. We always had computers at home because of my dad's job, so gaming was in my life from a very young age. I got into red box *Dungeons & Dragons* with friends in my teens, and plenty of RPG activity followed after that, which was then replaced by a lot of wargaming in my twenties. Fairly typical I guess!

I don't have much time for any of it these days, along with reading itself, which is a great shame. I still get some console gaming done along with miniature collecting. Maybe it's an age thing, but I'm becoming pretty jaded about everything – I've lost interest in getting every new thing, playing every new game and seeing every new movie. This has freed me to focus on fewer things I'm truly interested in; for example, the recent *Oldhammer* movement which focuses on old wargaming and classic miniatures.

How do you keep up-to-date with changes in both science and science-fiction? Do you read journals, regularly surf certain websites, etc?

I used to keep tabs on things, but lately I've let the information come to me – it's very difficult to keep track of what's new and cool these days! That's also the result of working in a computer game company for five years; as soon as a movie was announced, we'd follow it until it came out, and people would frame-by-frame the trailers and pick out all the problems. It drove me nuts, so now I'm a more passive consumer. I am making an effort to catch up with older things, for example I'm watching all the original *Star Trek* episodes online, for the first time since they scared the pants off me when I was small. It's very interesting to compare my memories of certain things to the reality. I try to keep broadly up to date with space science via NASA and similar sites, however. I think if we can't get behind space exploration, we're doomed as a species.

Your visualisation powers are clearly mighty – where do you find inspiration? Do you prefer to be given pretty free rein in an art brief, or do you prefer a tight description before you start?

It's a difficult choice. I've had intensely detailed briefs before, and always simplify them if the client is willing. Too much detail is not only a headache for an artist, it also usually produces an inferior illustration. Too little guidance in an art brief is a problem, too; it sounds good, but can result in mistakes and misunderstandings. The most important thing as a client is to relate your intent to the artist, regarding both the project or world, and the required picture itself.

What's your dream job as an artist/illustrator?

I've been lucky enough to work on great subjects like *Star Wars* and Middle-earth. I think my dream job would be to produce a heavily illustrated book, with as much emphasis on the overall design and quality of the object itself, as the art inside. I'm not sure what the subject would be. I do love the idea of working on classic tales like *King Arthur* or *Robin Hood*.

What are you working on right now? What does 2014 hold for you?

I've been unusually busy since late 2013, which is great. At the moment it's a lot of historical stuff, with some kid's books and fantasy stuff thrown in. I'm sure it will be more of the same for the rest of the year!

Do you undertake fiction commissions, too? Or any other areas of the genre – concept work for games, comic books, film?

I try to be a practical all-rounder, which is better for business and also challenges me. So I consider all projects, no matter where they're from. Many people say it's best to only do one thing these days, but I like the idea of being a more old-fashioned, versatile commercial artist. It feels right to me.

Where can we find out more about your work? Where's the best place to look at your portfolio?

The best place is my main website, ***www.jasonjuta.com*** – you can find my galleries, history, testimonials and contact details all there.

Thanks very much for appearing in FOCUS magazine. The best of luck and all success for the future!

Thanks for asking, Sarah. It was an honour!

FIN

Building the World Within

by Robert Harkess

As magic is to fantasy, so tech is to science fiction. And, like most aspects of world-building, it can be as subtle or as in-yer-face as the author deems fit. I usually prefer the iceberg strategy; a significant amount of research or invention, of which only five to ten per cent is revealed.

Some may think this seems like a lot of wasted effort. If you aren't going to use it, why worry about it, and if you have taken the time to figure it out, why shouldn't you show everybody how clever you have been? I disagree, and suggest that less is more. The fact that you have taken the time to figure it all out means it is sitting in the back of your authorial mind as you write. It indirectly permeates your world because it becomes commonplace, assumed. Your reader can feel that, can see when something is so everyday that it barely rates a mention, and that adds depth to the world you have built.

As I said when I started this ramble, tech and magic are interchangeable terms depending on your point of reference. In fantasy, a story can be killed stone dead by a badly thought out theory of magic. Everything fantastical needs limits, and those limits need to be a function of the conflict of the story. What is the point of having an unrestricted magical ability without consequence? Either the magician fixes everything with a wave of the hand, which is boring, or he doesn't, which makes him an idiot.

Tech has the same constraints. If it is all-powerful, or there are no repercussions to its use, then it has little use except as the opening of a post-apoc story. It is very easy to write yourself into a blind alley where you realise your whole novel could have been resolved by the use of a fifty credit hand scanner available from any bioengineering tool shop. It is always worth taking the time to understand your magic.

And on that understanding, I'd like to talk about an area of magic – sorry, tech – that not only fascinates me but which I still think is a rich seam of story ideas yet to be mined. I like to work it into my worlds when I can, and each time I do I try to shift the angles. The first problem comes, though, in putting a label on it. It's one of those concepts that everybody thinks they understand, but ask three people, and you'll get five answers. For the sake of a hook to hang this thing on, I'm going to call it *AI*.

Artificial Intelligence – probably one of the most frequently misused terms in the genre, and yet a huge well of potential material. Stick with me while I tiptoe through some definitions, and I promise not to tread in any piles of philosophy along the way.

So is an AI a thinking computer? While you try to define 'think' – and good luck with that – I'll nip off and make a coffee. So how about we define intelligence as the ability to learn, and to assimilate new knowledge in such a way that the 'machine' can infer and deduce new facts from the information? In that case, we have just described the main computer of the USS Enterprise as an AI – and it certainly qualifies as the most basic idea of an artificial intelligence. HAL initially comes into this category. It is a practical definition, and we are very close to creating constructs of this type, if we haven't already.

However, from a writing standpoint this level of AI is limited except

Robert Harkess grudgingly shares his writing time with his real-world job, where he does things with computers and bosses people about. He lives just north of London with a wonderful wife and two attention-seeking dragons shape-shifted into the forms of domestic felines. He blogs, a nasty habit that many have tried to break him of, at: **www.rbharkess.co.uk.**

His new book ***Warrior Stone: Underland*** (as R. B. Harkess) has just been published through Fox Spirit.

as a starting point. You might as well try writing a story about a spanner.

'But that's not what I meant,' I hear you cry. I know it's not; you actually meant something that is self-aware, that understands it is unique in the universe, that possesses identity. We are starting to get into the territory of Lt Cmdr Data, the Matrix, and (though some might argue with me here) the Borg.

This group has much more potential. Again, it can represent a starting point. It can also be a theme in and of itself.

Still not what you meant? I know. You want the good stuff. Emotions. This generally promotes the most divisive arguments about the subject. I moderated a panel on AI at BristolCon in 2013, and was astonished when three well-respected SF writers all stated flat out that they did not believe that AI would ever happen. This is the 'level' they were referring to. Right up there with 'Artificial People'.

Darn it, now that's another group we didn't include in the original definition. Constructs that are designed to mimic humans in thought and function. Now we are getting to it, aren't we? Data, Minds, Nexus 6, Blade Runner? Or what about humans encoded into a non-bio construct, such as Frederik Pohl's 'Heechee' series, or the awesome 'Ghost in the Shell' series, first written by Masamune Shirow. Are these now simply constructs mimicking what the people 'downloaded' into them used to do, or are they really who they once were?

This is where I start being a bit more serious, because here is the meat of the concepts I want to offer you in this article. It's very easy, and entertaining, to use sophisticated human analogues as a way of introducing a new character, often a quirky one. The 'Minds' in the Culture novels (Iain M Banks, as if I needed to say) are great examples of this. Hugely entertaining, and yet to me something of a cop-out. Why would a sentient being of such scope and power behave like a silly old man, or an overenthusiastic prize fighter except to add humour or colour? Unless that in itself is a subtext?

True, we are in the world of science fiction, of *fiction*, and the overriding rule is to entertain our beloved readers. This is as it should be. And yet I can't help feeling that the subject has so much more to offer, and it offers it over and over again.

With such limited definitions of what constitutes artificial life, of what 'sentience' actually means, how could we assume that it would evolve in a way that mimicked our own mentalities? Or would we place constraints on such constructs that would prevent them from being anything other than a human analogue? If that were the case I might support those authors on my panel who said we would never create digital life. Perhaps this is the subtext of the Minds I mentioned above. Are they built with heavy-handed constraints that force them to behave as specific human analogues? If so, how are they 'free'?

My personal view on this is that if looks like a duck, walks like a duck and quacks like a duck, who are we to say it isn't one? There are already programs out there that can beat most modern forms of the Turing test. Without dipping into metaphysics, we all follow programs we are taught as children, or discover for ourselves, and frequently the emotions that we show to the world are fictitious or false. Inappropriate emotions and actions happen when the wiring in our brains gets screwed. So long as emotion and self awareness are convincing, I'm not sure it matters so much how they are made. Others think very differently – or might – in your story.

It is when you start digging into the concepts of *self* and *mind* you start to realise how much there is to explore *behind* the quirky characters and the human-analogues. Stop to think for a minute of the morality of forcing a digital entity to conform to human norms. What if the entity

knew, and resented the constraint? Or the morality of switching off an experiment in digital learning that exceeded the learning capabilities of a disabled – or even normal – child?

Please don't think I am protesting for life-rights for Cog. I'm not. Yet. But these are things that may have to be confronted in the future – and isn't that what we are all about? And, yes, I know it's been done before. One particularly good example that comes to mind is the *ST-TNG* episode 'Measure of a Man' (S2Ep9), where the cast has to confront just such an issue. Again in TNG, the death/failure of Data's 'daughter' – Lal – brought on by her ability to feel emotions and her inability to control them.

But because it has been done before doesn't mean you cannot do it again. Ideas are there to be re-used, explored, tweaked and offered again. Times change, customs metamorphose into something we could never have predicted a decade or generation before, or stubbornly stay the same in spite of every effort to change them.

All the various levels of what we categorise under the umbrella of 'Artificial Intelligence' offer the opportunity to re-examine so many of our finest and darkest actions and emotions and – if you are really brave and think you can get inside the head of a non-human, digital life form – from a very different perspective.

Happy writing.

FIN

MORE NEWS FROM ORBIT

TERRY JACKMAN, CO-ORDINATOR OF THE BSFA'S ONLINE WRITERS' WORKSHOPS, REPORTS

SALES AND SUCCESSES

Dom Dulley:
- short story, 'Saturday Night Genocide' in ***Andromeda Spaceways*** Inflight magazine.
- Short story, 'Past Imperfect' in ***Bastion Science*** magazine.

Geoff Nelder:
- short story, 'The Perplexed Eye of a Sufi Pirate' in ***Monk Punk, Shadow of the Unknown*** omnibus.
- short story, 'Chicken' in ***The Horror Zine***.
- short story, 'Target Practice', in ***Encounters*** magazine.

Mark Gorton:
- flash fiction, 'Toys Will Be Toys', in ***TTA Press Advent Calendar!***
- flash fiction, 'Ghosts of Christmas to Come' on ***www.365tomorrow.com***

Myke Wood:
- short story, 'Bring Me My Broadsword and My Spreadsheets of Fire' in ***Sorcerous Signals*** and its print compilaton counterpart, ***Mystic Signals.***

Mark Iles:
- novel, ***The Cult of Lions*** published by Solstice

Steve Turnbull:
- we don't normally include self-published novellas here, as it's a sticky topic, but his ***Murder Out of the Blue*** has just had a very good review from ***The Review Hart***, so I'm making an exception.

And finally to Gary Graham, who having organised one university-linked symposium — 'Future Cities' in which some of our members took part — is now working on 'Cities of Flight', again mixing speakers from 'reality' and the world of SF. And got himself into ***The Guardian.***

Please note, the 'Cities of Flight' event was on June 5th, with some funding available for projects exploring the potential of SF to generate social and economic change.

FIVE OF THE WEIRDER REASONS WE SHOULD ALL READ MORE?

1. It makes us 'cleverer'. Studies with kids show it lengthens attention span and helps them think more clearly.
2. It makes us kinder! It transports us out of our comfort zones into different situations and cultures, which helps us empathise with others.
3. It de-stresses. According to a 2009 University of Sussex study, it was the most effective remedy. It even beat the cuppa!
4. Via book clubs it increases social ease, interaction and the sense of belonging.
5. It boosts brain health. Avid readers can prevent brain ageing and memory decline – boy do I need some of that.

POEMS FROM THE STARS

BSFA Poetry Submissions edited by ***Charles Christian***

What? Being a poet is better than being a novelist! There was an interesting story in a recent issue of The Bookseller magazine which pointed out that although sales of poetry collections are low in terms of numbers (when compared with sales of novels) the rate at which poetry books are generally discounted (currently the average is 12%) is much lower than the price-cuts novels suffer. Time to put away my half-finished novel and focus on a haiku collection methinks! Now on with the poetry, we missed the last FOCUS due to me throwing a major-league sickie – and I have the scars to prove it – so we have three pages for you this time...

The Ghost Keeper

I guard the ghosts
And keep them safe.

I command the old ghosts
And the new,
The false and the true,
The kind and the terrible.

I can unlock their metal cell
And send them forth
To haunt the lives of men.

Partitions open, close.

I am Cerebus and Peter.

Few know my power.
Few know me.

I keep ghosts.

...John Keane

The King in Yellow Haiku

Yellow fades to white
Carcosa in the winter
Horrors hide in snow

Walking on the shore
Beneath the yellowing leaves
Lake Hali seems strange

...D.J.Tyrer

Them Future Things

through the pain
in my brain
i see them future
things
that bring
robotic yearnings
and ready-to-eat
meals
without wheels
flying high
in vermillion sky
where jenga homes
wait to fall
like rome
or maybe
a single tear
that is alone
on plastic shoreline
with mechanical whales
doing tricks
as i feel the prick
of flesh
upon flesh
in the heat
of the night
while doin' it wrong
just to get some right
sings the song
of the automaton
who sits
on my throne
drinking warm oil
from tin cup
and dreaming of
tomorrow

...T.J. Cheverie (Canada)

Valentine from a Ghul to a Corpse

How I love your putrid beauty.
Your breasts lie soft and heavy
And seeping as mould-furred fruit.

Your bloating skin is mottled
And tacky as wet blue cheese;
The penetrability
Of cold, quivering, custard.

I long to kiss your seeping lips,
Crush them wet as over-ripe pears
Against your still-perfect white teeth.

The sweet aromas wafting
From the soft, dark corruption
Nestling within your pale ribs:
How they inflame my senses!

Let my tongue delve in the seething,
Maggot caverns of your cold lap.
And feast on your delights all night.

Oh, how I despise my coarse urges.
How I envy your indifference.

...David Gullen

Useless Degrees

In a world
built on maths, science
and the Internet

still they read
politics
art
and Drama Studies

to work
in call-centres, bars
and rowdy
classrooms.

...John Keane

Rogue Science

From the start, our science
never listened: always at constant

velocity down the street, stamping
its cubic feet when we called.

At suspended-animation time,
our science would crawl

across fields in black Kevlar
to crack spines.
We left our science
by the dirt. Its fingers

are in your pocket. It's asking
for your charity, sirs, your warmth.

...Kelly Kanayama

Future Shocks

It got them all: intergalactic lovers,
outlaws on Saturn, robot anarchists
surrendered in five pages to that twist
of irony. Huddled under the covers,

post-bedtime torch in hand, you held it back
until 2000 and its judgment came
for you too, hissing in your ear: *the crime*
is life or forwarding your council tax

to a nonexistent clone or wiping out
your ex's records from the time stream. Twenty
years of spreadsheets in the cubes is *plenty*
of time to think it over, creep and doubt

you ever dreamed of lighting the black sprawl
between the stars. Your future's in the walls.

...Kelly Kanayama

Two Sci-faiku

Deforestation
Destroys the last gorilla
Burger, anyone?

Electrons, photons
Are they really enclosed cats?
Schrodinger?: yes/no

...Patrick Mahon

Voodoo

No laughter on the stairs that day you find
her in her room. She's gazing out towards
the old churchyard, a weird look on her face
you've never known before, resigned, world-wise
beyond her years. She's staring at the grave
her brother fills. You've heard her many times,
imaginary friend, small talk, but now
you realise she's speaking to a ghost.
They say when one twin dies the other's drawn
into the shadow-space . No Christian rite,
no prayers, good work or penance can suffice.
You're educated, modern, westernised,
too proud to dabble in blood sacrifice.
Week later, doesn't wake; no warning signs.

...Peter Branson

STEAMY BELLA DONNA

Gaslight red district of Desiderata
Blinking reddish eye orbs of Bella Donna
Tick tick whirl Oh Tock
Petite morts bordello, immortality
Steam Age Englishman's steamy erotica
Blossom bed of Night Flower automata
Tick tick world's cracked clock
Mechanistic femme galente lacks disease
Shapely Bella Donna she's no Victorian Femme de Voyage
Transformer of petite mal male ecstasy poison vintage
Nude female winged form
Transcendental ego found in maison de tolerances to please
A corporeal incorporeal quicunque vult fleurs du mal mage
Industrialized civilized man's clock-workings unwind from cage
Holy Baudelaire norm
Venus in ermine fur and shiny sheen love, not given slightly
Porno-deadly made Faery euphonia
Toffer cogs beautiful scream vagina dentata
Tick ticking twirling lock
Age yearning, fear, sated, immortality.

...Frederick Mayer

(Editor's Note: A "quicunque vult" or a "whoever want to girl" was Victorian English slang for a prostitute. A "femme de voyage" was an early form of blow-up doll that, apparently, could be conveniently folded up "into a gentleman's hat for travelling.")

Dustbowl 5000

Last seen headed into a black hole to
the west,
Wearing stellar pants and astral vests,
on their seven sigma synthetic legs
and chests,
claiming that they'd done their best.

Now huddled in their capsule,
in a nebula somewhere,
probably craving crispy carrots
and cleanly parted plastic hair.

Slurping grease, gnawing gristle,
masticating pseudo fried fat,
wondering what to make of that,
certainly not a serum.

Look at what they've left behind,
accelerators still on line,
Petri-jars of fluoro-brine,
and early stages of design.

Fully funded, statute free,
in an air of confident esprit
and a state of the art facility,
(built by the dinosaurs, obviously,
just like Stonehenge).

Why did they flee, you may ask?
Abandoning the protoplast,
leaving the human race aghast.
They should have known it wouldn't
last.
Maybe they were Communists.

These days,
there's not a living thing around,
up on there on their research mound.
Their ship came in, but it ran aground.
No compatible plug-in found.

...AuthorX1

The Summons

A ship ravaged at sea.
Epitaphs, I see are long faded.

A whisper, a visage ghostly faint.
Reality spur by a nightmares birth.

Dried blood on a rotting door,
memories rioting in my mind.

My bones reduced to ash.
Time forgets in a brash manner.

Follow the strange feeling,
kneeling at the fading sun.

Wishing for more sand
and the hour glass is empty.

You are now as I.
I am now as you are.

A memory that haunts.

...David Veigel

Tears in Rain - the Death of Roy Batty

"I've...seen things you people wouldn't believe. Attack ships on fire off the shoulder of Orion. I watched C-beams glitter in the dark near the Tannhäuser Gate. All those... moments...will be lost in time...like tears...in...rain. Time...to die..." Blade Runner

In your last breath there was no electric
As your heartbeat broke into being human

And your wires cried their tears into rust
In a trembling universe of broken music.

You hunted us down to teach us our breaking,
That we must admit sometime the truth of death

As you lifted Deckard from falling from the building
And the reel shivered as if alive.

At that moment the corporations were defeated
While the future flickered through us like fire at will

Burns itself down to the truth in the ash,
Burns down to the very spirit that, like your breath,

In the circuitry of the world, is child
That keeps playing around your last moment

Into the ubiquitous longing for living
What song will last the trial of man and sing us awake again.

...Patrick Mackay

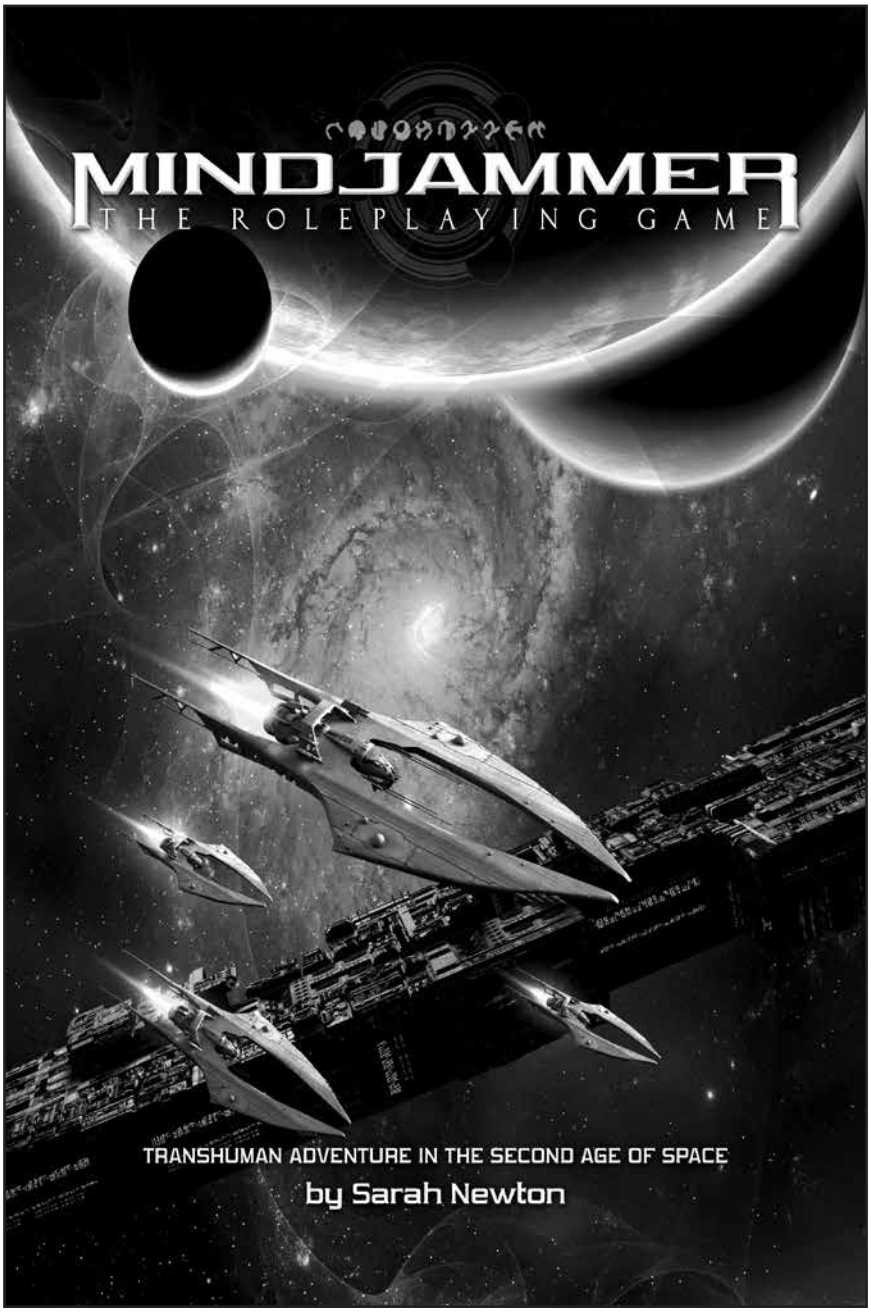
Charles Christian is a barrister and Reuters correspondent turned award winning technology journalist, newsletter publisher, blogger, and science fiction & fantasy author. Away from the day-job he can be found at **UrbanFantasist.com**.

His latest book, ***Tomorrow's Ghosts*** is available on Amazon. Submissions (and artwork) for *Poems From The Stars* are always welcome. Please email them direct to: **charles@charles-christian.com**

A Roleplayer's Guide to World-building

by Sarah Newton

My name's Sarah, and I'm a world-builder. I'll do it anywhere, any time, for any reason. I started before I'd reached double figures, and I'm still at it; gobbets of planets and civilisations drop off me wherever I walk. It can be a messy business – but I know, dear reader, that I'm not alone...



I write roleplaying games and fiction. The process of world-building is common to both endeavours, of course; but my own groping experience tells me they're not the same, but different in interesting ways. In this article, I'd like to offer some snippets of preliminary travelogue from my own adventures in the world of world-building.

The first thing that strikes me is that world-building for roleplaying games is pretty much the opposite of fiction. When you write fiction, you want all your world-building 'off stage', so that it informs everything you write, but isn't forced in the reader's face. Characters behave in ways which are consistent with their backgrounds and the cultural and technological assumptions of their setting – but you don't express those assumptions explicitly. Instead, the reader understands that the way your characters are behaving is telling them something about your world. If a character casually expresses that he might get killed that night, and hopes it doesn't make too much of a mess because he's scheduled in an important business meeting the next day, the reader starts to grasp that maybe there's some kind of digital existence, regeneration technology, or even 're-sleeving' mitigating the finality of death. But as a fiction writer you don't need to explain all that beforehand – readers are used to picking up on these cues, and part of the 'sensawunda' of science-fiction is the slow process of piecing these puzzles together and working it out, one step at a time, with gasps of excitement and realisation.

In roleplaying games, the situation is almost exactly the opposite. I say 'almost' because a roleplaying game is a strange beast; sure it's meant to be played, but it's also a book, and meant to be read, too – usually (but not always) by the gamer who's going to take on the role of game master. This makes RPG books double-edged; the best aren't just cracking games and settings to play, they're also a great read, too.

But let's talk broad strokes. If fiction's axiom is 'show, don't tell', then a roleplaying game's world-building approach is 'don't

just tell, draw me a map, too!' When a reader reads a work of science-fiction, he's enjoying feeling buoyed by his confidence in your writer's skill as a world-builder; he doesn't need to know everything, he just needs to trust that you won't let him down when it counts. He can be swept along in an almost euphoric self-abandonment into what he (hopefully rightly) assumes is a logical, well-made, and consistent universe. Reading's an active process, but the world-building is something you take on faith.

As a roleplaying game world-builder, you have an uncannily futuristic job on your hands; you have to, without hubris, try and give a brain-dump, a gestalt memory and thought transfer, of how you grok your setting. When the RPG reader comes away from the book, she not only has to feel that she has confidence in *your* grasp of the setting; she has to feel confident that she, the reader, grasps it almost as well, too. When a Game Master sits down at a table to run a game, she has to feel *au fait* enough with your world-building that she can improvise with it – riff off your ideas, expand them, build on them and make them her own, all on the fly. That's a pretty tall order.

So, the sexiest and most intimate of mind-melds is what's called for, right? Well, maybe. You see, there's another side, too – one which is a lot closer to traditional fiction writing than you might think. When you pen a setting as an RPG writer, you split your writing into two unequal halves. The first involves lots of nitty-gritty detail, descriptions of places, people, even histories, cultures, and languages, technology, equipment, occupations, what-have-you – the whole paraphernalia of a civilisation which a budding game master has to understand. The second – arguably the more important – revolves around conveying a set of assumptions and axioms; 'keys' which will unlock the underpinnings of the setting and allow the budding GM to view them, grok them, and riff off them effortlessly.

That's one of the reasons why fantasy and space opera are the two dominant genres in RPGs. Both take the axioms of our own twenty-first century world, or some pretty blurry depictions of our history, as their foundations; stuff which we've all (unless you were raised in a box. If you were, contact me – we should talk) been exposed to pretty much since birth. We all know what the typical faux-Tolkienian mediaeval European-esque fantasy world looks like, or a faux-mythical Greek, Arthurian or Arabian Nights one; we know what spaceships are (they're like ocean ships, only in space, right?), and we know what Spitfire dogfights and Vietnam war movies look like. Ram all that together, and you've got *Star Wars*, or *Battlestar Galactica*, or *Stargate*, or *Firefly*, or any one of a potentially limitless number of almost-clones.

That presents the RPG writer with a real problem. People who play RPGs – either as players or GMs – are out to have fun. They love story-telling, sure, but more than likely they're not there for the blood, sweat, and tears of the fiction-creating process; they want to spin a grand group yarn, roll some dice, and have a blast. At least, for *most* of what they're doing. That means you have to make most of your world-building easy to grasp, at least in axiomatic outline. Sure, a GM won't mind flicking through a book for a description of a starport, planet, or alien species during a game; but if she's not sure whether you even *have* starports, planets, or alien species in your science-fiction RPG in the first place, then she's probably going to feel all at sea running a game built in your lavishly detailed setting.

For that reason, when designing RPG settings tropes and even clichés *can be your friend*. What's a cliché if not an infobomb – a tightly packed meme hypertextually linked into all our brains and our collective consciousness, waiting to be struck to resonate through all our thoughts with the same sweet (perhaps sometimes a bit too sweet) note?

But where's the science-fictional world-building value in sloshing down a bucketload of trope and cliché when building an RPG setting? In RPG circles we call that a 'heart-breaker' – when you've basically gone all out to build the BEST SETTING EVAR because – get this –

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hyperspace is GREEN, or the clever transhuman dudes with pointy ears aren't Vulcans 'cos they are bald and not black-haired and do a three fingered salute instead of... and... well, you get the picture. In the early days, when heartbreakers had just been invented (an antediluvian era known among cognoscenti as 'The Seventies'), you could get away with that stuff – kind of like writing your own version of *There And Back Again* or forming your own bedroom band with a Fab Five not a Fab Four.

But now? Not so much. With the advent of digital publishing, a million bedroom world-builders cry out with heartbreaker settings, and then are lost into the great cacophony of the web. Which may be for the best.

So, you want to write a science-fiction setting. You don't want to write a heartbreaker, but at the same time you don't want to craft something so exotic and unapproachable that no budding GM can ever get near grokking how to play it. What to do?

Maybe we're converging with fiction world-building again here. To craft a compelling RPG setting, you need to focus not on detail, or on really wild and out-there technology, but on *theme*. What's your setting *about*? Sure, you may have intelligent starships, weird mystical space monks, or a zillion subspecies of aliens all looking strangely human, with weirdly historical-analogue cultures and unlikely languages – but why are you telling me?

Just being weird for weird's sake isn't good world-building. In RPGs just as much as fiction, you're offering your readers – and your players – food for thought. You've clearly found something fascinating enough in your universe to make you want to write what's near enough an encyclopedia about it; but what is that thing? That's what you have to convey in your world-building.

I think that runs parallel with fiction world-building; although, with RPGs, the focus is on that 'fascinating thing' in a way it isn't necessarily in fiction. In fiction world-building, your principal goal in your storytelling is to portray *characters* – however you define them. People having adventures; individuals to whom *stuff happens*, whether they like it or not; and how they live, thrive, and survive as a result.

In RPGs, you don't get the chance to do that. In fact, those character stories are what are going to unfold at gaming tables everywhere if you've done your job right. Your readers are going to become players and game masters in your lovingly crafted setting, and tell tales of their own characters and their adventures.

That's a big pressure for an RPG writer. Whereas a fiction writer can often place less emphasis on the detail, theme, and (dare I say it) originality of his setting, because more than anything he's telling a story about *characters*, an RPG world-builder's work will come under exacting scrutiny for precisely those aspects.

It's a paradox; fiction world-building can get away with suggesting detail rather than presenting it at great length, and can deal with some very complex concepts within the framework of those suggestions; but they don't then have to explain how all that works, because the world-building is effectively the backdrop to the character-led story which forms the plot of the work. Roleplaying game world-building needs to present originality and compelling coolness of theme and detail, but to do so in a way which draws on the 'common sense' understanding of genre and its tropes which the reader comes to the game with.

There's a way to unpick this – especially with science-fiction RPGs. There are some settings which profess to be science-fiction but are basically fantasy with rayguns and starships – the awesome *Star Wars* is one such. In those kind of games, you're largely dealing with quests, fighting, and heroics, rather than getting to grips with speculative science-fiction concepts and their implications for the nature of humankind. And there's a lot of crossover between people who play fantasy RPGs and those more 'science-fantasy' RPGs. But those

who play science-fiction RPGs often seem to do so for different reasons; they actually want to deal with challenging science-fiction concepts in the group story-telling sessions which RPGs provide. This, thank the Force and the Federation and the Lords of Kobol, is the saving grace for a science-fiction RPG writer; because, even though you want to present large, broad-brush axioms which tap into the vast shared understanding of the SF genre, you can also focus the shining light of your originality and try and convey the insights you want, without worrying that the reader and gamer is going to give up because it's not accessible enough. As long as your setting has clear axioms which speak to the history of our genre, you can push the uniqueness of *that particular part* where your setting marks itself out from all others, and believe that your readers and gamers are going to get excited by that.

That's a different set of priorities to fiction world-building – but they are complementary. In a sense, the 'Bible' you write when doing world-building for a work of fiction can easily become your RPG setting book; and your RPG setting book can easily become the implied yet unexpressed bedrock upon which your fictional tales are built. World-building is a guilty pleasure, but with RPGs, it's also a spectator and participatory sport.

Let's get specific. I've discussed the conceptual differences between world-building for fiction and RPGs; I'd now like to talk about some of the ways I approach RPG world-building myself – and maybe that process will shed some light on fiction world-building, too.

When I approach a setting, I usually have a Big Question in my mind that needs answering. The *Mindjammer* setting developed almost incidentally, accidentally, while I was creating another setting – a far future techno-fantasy setting called

The Chronicles of Future Earth. In that setting, the world is the Earth of the inexpressibly far future, in a post-technological and even post-historical era when interstellar civilisation is part of a forgotten past, technology is magic, and some very hostile transcendent intelligences appear to rule the world. When I wrote the 'ancient history' of that setting, I included a couple of throwaway lines about 'the stars singing with the songs of Man', and our species having achieved an interstellar 'Commonality of Humankind'. Two infobombs, two little memes, popped out, fuses fizzing.

I asked myself; what happened to that Commonality, so that it would fall so catastrophically and end up, perhaps fifty or a hundred thousand years later, in the world of *The Chronicles of Future Earth*? How could a powerful, hyper-advanced civilisation crumble to almost nothing?

I got some answers to that – you'll have to wait a few years to find out exactly what they are – but in getting those answers I also began to fill in the early history of that Commonality – how humankind expanded to the stars. I knew that all this would happen about fifteen thousand years in our future – but that in itself gave me a problem. I'm an avid transhumanist and futurologist, and it seems clear to me that in far less than fifteen thousand years our own species will be transformed so much that it will be completely incomprehensible to our puny twenty-first century minds. One of the definitions of space opera is that it takes twenty-first century people and plonks them pretty much unchanged in the far future (just look at those musos in the cantina in Mos Eisley! Rehearsals, dudes!); whereas science-fiction tries to imagine what 'humans' of the far future will *become*. I asked myself; how could it be that the Commonality of Humankind of the seventeenth millennium would be comprehensible to us, even recognisable to us as the same species?

Other SF writers have wrestled with this question; witness *Dune*'s Butlerian Jihad, or Banks's 'Minds', deliberately created in their creators' image. For *Mindjammer*, I wanted an answer which would express what I began to realise was the central theme of the setting; the battle for the future of the human species.

So, let's zoom out a minute. First, do you see what's happening? The whole world-building process is unfolding in a dialectic. It doesn't have any clear directionality; it's sprawling wildly wherever the questions take it. But it has its own exigencies, its own life, its own inexorable logic – it knows where it's going, even if I don't. Ask a question; get an answer. But with the answer comes a question which demands another answer. Try and keep it all in your mind, long enough to write it down.

Often when world-building it's good to do a mind-map. You know the sort of thing; an enormous sheet of paper, and write down one concept, draw a circle round it, then wait for another concept to split off – in some weird conceptual mitosis – and make a new bubble of its own. Drawn a line between them, and carry on. If it's going well, in no time at all you'll fill the sheet (and probably several others) with something that looks like an electron microscope image of neural synapses, or an artist's view of the chained galactic hyperclusters which form the largest scale structure of the cosmos we've yet been able to glimpse. And, like the universe (and possibly the mindscape, too...), that mind-map can go on forever.

I used to do mind-maps a lot. These days, I tend to use a programme. Specifically, I use Microsoft OneNote; it just seems to map one-to-one with how my brain works. There are other apps which may suit you better. I have OneNote databases for every setting I've written, and they're constantly expanding as I push back the event horizon and sketch in new discoveries at their rippling edges.

Now, in fiction, that dialectic process of an ever-expanding mind-map will throw up thousands upon thousands of story ideas. The fiction writer then has the unenviable (if occasionally orgasmic) task of trying to assemble the top-picks of those into some kind of coherent whole – perhaps even the plot threads of a novel. But the RPG writer actually has it easier at this point; because those story ideas are what we call *scenario hooks*. We're back to our memetic infobombs here; in the same way an ideal RPG setting book will convey the sensawunda of a setting, its unique themes and ideational content, wrapped up in a leavening of commonly-held tropes, that same setting book will also try and provide hints, tips, and ideas for actually playing the game. Sure, you can create whole 'scenarios' – basically detailed starting points for the improvisational story-telling which RPG gaming is – but also you can just provide little snippets; tiny postage stamp-sized nuggets of plot which express something cool or essential about your setting which the game master can then run with and unpack in play.

In other words, while the fiction writer is sweating blood trying to make sense of that infinitely expandable mass of story ideas, as an RPG setting writer you simply have an editing job on your hands; to look through those story ideas, select the coolest, the most useful, the most fun in play, and note them down, *pretty much unchanged* in the setting book for the GM to use. That sometimes feels like cheating, but it's not; if it all works well, you've encapsulated a moment of sheer inspiration and insight into that tiny memetic nuke, and injected it directly into the brain of your reader.

Now just to watch for the flash of light over the horizon when it detonates...

FIN

transhumanism /tranz'hju:menizm — the belief or theory that the human race can evolve beyond its current physical and mental limitation, especially by means of science and technology.

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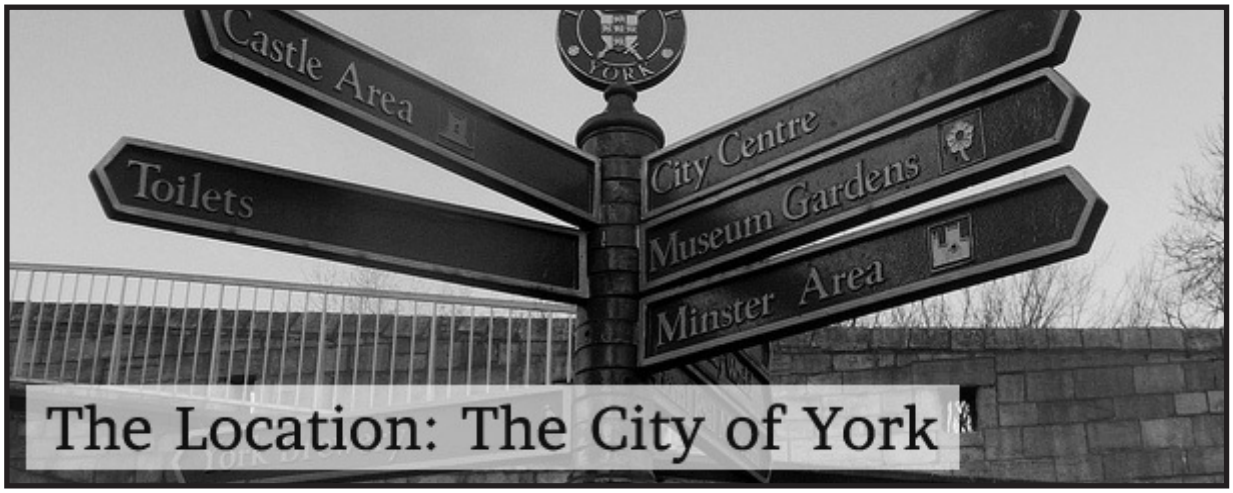
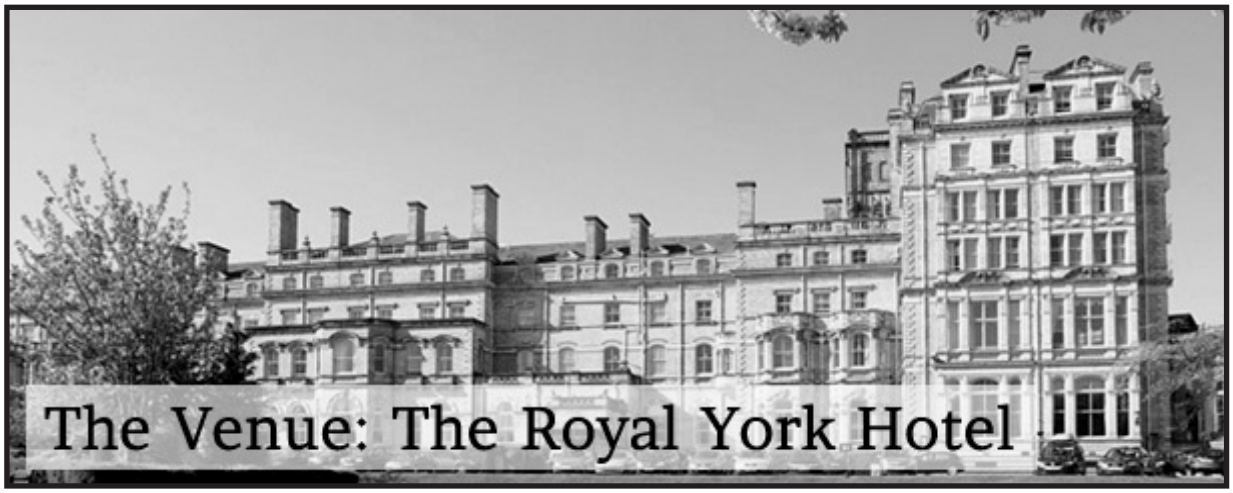


The Location: The City of York



The Venue: The Royal York Hotel

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Nineteen Turns

by Ian Sales

It took me more than two decades, but five years ago I finally discovered THE SECRET TO WRITING FICTION: Write about what interests you.

Yes, I read science fiction and I write science fiction, but I'm not really *interested* in science fiction. It's a mode of literature, it's not a subject in which you *can* be interested. (Although the *study* of science fiction is.) I made my discovery purely by accident. Like every other wannabe genre writer, I'd been trying to write the sort of stories I saw in magazines, anthologies and collections. I'd dream up science-fictional 'ideas', take two of them, crash them together, and see if I could find a plot in the resulting wreckage. Sometimes it worked; often it didn't. But then I discovered THE SECRET.

It happened like this:

It was 2009 and the fortieth anniversary of the Apollo 11 Moon landing. I'd been running a blog for several years on which I published reviews of books about space exploration – *A Space About Books About Space* – and I decided to celebrate the anniversary by writing and publishing a suitable short story. After all, I had all these books about astronauts and space programmes…

I decided my story – 'The Old Man of the Sea of Dreams'; it ended up as a 1000-word flash fiction piece – would be about an Apollo mission to the far side of the Moon. Because this was going on my Space Books blog, I needed to get the details absolutely spot-on. I consulted my books, and various online resources, wrote the story and published it. And discovered that I'd enjoyed the process of writing it so much more than I had other stories I'd written. I liked how the narrative slotted neatly into the real world – in fact, I'd even embedded links in the story to relevant articles in Wikipedia. There was nothing in the story that was *invented*… except the way I'd put those real-world elements together to create my science fiction.

Now, it could be argued that this is nothing more than 'mainstream' fiction, which relies on the real world because that's where it's set. Science fiction's settings are invented. But 'The Old Man of the Sea of Dreams' was definitely speculative – not only did it describe an Apollo mission which never took place, but the final twist also referred to something which had never happened. It was, to my mind, definitely science fiction; but it was also carefully nailed into place in the real world.

But if you're not going to 'make it up as you go along', it does make writing fiction that much more difficult. Those details need to be right, you need to look them up and make sure you're presenting them correctly. But it's worth it, it makes those details so much richer… because they're embedded in the real world, with all the depth and history and complexity that engenders.

'The Old Man of the Sea of Dreams' taught me that not only did I enjoy the research – well, it *was* a subject that fascinated me – but I'd also enjoyed the art of taking that research and moulding it into a piece of science fiction. And the obvious take-away from this was: if you're going to write a story, write about a topic that you'll enjoy researching.

That's partly how my Apollo Quartet came about. I wanted to write something else about Apollo astronauts. That became *Adrift on the Sea of Rains*. For the second book of the quartet, *The Eye With Which The Universe Beholds Itself*, I used an idea I'd been intending for a hard sf novella but changed it so it featured Apollo programme hardware. For Apollo Quartet 3 *Then Will The Great Ocean Wash Deep Above*… I wanted to

Ian Sales has recently been working on a quartet of novellas, the Apollo Quartet. The first, ***Adrift on the Sea of Rains***, was published in 2012. It won the BSFA Award for that year and was shortlisted for the Sidewise Award for Alternate History. The second book, ***The Eye With Which The Universe Beholds Itself***, was published in early 2013, and the third book, ***Then Will The Great Ocean Wash Deep Above***, in late 2013. The final novella, ***All That Outer Space Allows***, will appear in mid-2014. He has also been published in ***Jupiter, Postscripts, Alt hist,*** and the original anthologies ***Catastrophia, Vivisepulture, The Monster Book for Girls, Where Are We Going?, The Maginot Line and Because Of What Happened***. He can be found online at **iansales.com**

write about the Mercury 13, a group of women pilots who had passed the same tests given to the Mercury 7 astronauts; and I wanted to write about the bathyscaphe *Trieste*, which in 1960 visited the deepest part of any ocean, the Challenger Deep, 36,000 feet beneath the surface of the Pacific.

I generally find research falls into two types. First, I read up on the subject, to get a feel for it and how I plan to use it. So for *Then Will The Great Ocean Wash Deep Above* I read *Promised the Moon* (2002) by Stephanie Nolen, *The Mercury 13* (2003) by Martha Ackmann, *Right Stuff, Wrong Sex* (2006) by Margaret A Weitkampf, *Tethered Mercury* (2001) by Bernice Trimble Steadman, *Woman into Space* (1960) and *Jerrie Cobb: Solo Pilot* (1997) by, er, Jerrie Cobb, *Jackie Cochran: Pilot in the Fastest Lane* (2007) by Doris L Rich; and I watched *She Should Have Gone to the Moon* (2007), an excellent documentary by Ulrike Kubatta. Some of these books were quite difficult to find. My sources for the bathyscaphe narrative included *Seven Miles Down* (1961) by Jacques Piccard & Robert S Dietz, *The Death of the USS Thresher* (2004, revised) by Norman Polmar, a chapter from *Men Under Water* (1965) by James Dugan & Richard Vahan; and, on Youtube, *Ghosts of the Abyss* (2003) by James Cameron.

I'd decided before starting the novella that I was going to use the real Mercury 13 and not invented substitutes – which meant I had a duty to write them as close as possible to the actual people. Jerrie Cobb was the obvious choice as protagonist – not only was she the first of the Mercury 13 to be tested, but she was the group's most vocal advocate too… And she was the best documented. There were the two books she'd written; and she also featured in a number of articles in *Life* magazine, some of which were available in Google Books.

In point of fact, the only invented character in *Then Will The Great Ocean Wash Deep Above* is Lieutenant Commander John Grover McIntyre, the commander of the *Trieste* bathyscaphe in the second narrative. That was deliberate – the people involved with the *Trieste* were serving US Navy men and barely documented; so using an invented character allowed me to give him some, er, depth; and I could parachute him into the story at the point where the reader joined it so both could be briefed together. My plot for McIntyre's narrative was pretty much a blow-by-blow rewrite of a real CIA operation from 1972, as documented in a 2012 issue of *Quest: The History of Spaceflight* magazine. I moved the location from the Pacific to the Atlantic, and set it three years earlier, but the basic details remained the same. Nevertheless, I still needed to read up about how the *Trieste* had been used throughout its operating life. I also read *Sealab* (2012) by Ben Helwarth, about the US Navy's ill-fated project to research underwater habitats – but chiefly because I found the subject fascinating.

Once I'd started the writing, the second stage of the research came into play. Now I was after *detail*. Some of the books I'd already read were useful in this regard – especially when it came to dialogue spoken by various characters. But I also had a huge stack of books and online resources that I used when I wanted to know how to describe something as accurately, or as evocatively, as possible. For example, in *Then Will The Great Ocean Wash Deep Above* Jerrie Cobb makes the first US orbital flight, making her Mercury mission the novella's analogue of John Glenn's. So I referred to Glenn's autobiography, *John Glenn: A Memoir* (1999), to see how he had described his flight. *Light This Candle* (2004), a biography of Alan Shepard by Neal Thompson, and *Carrying the Fire* (1974) by Michael Collins, also proved helpful in this respect. (Incidentally, *Carrying the Fire* is easily the best of the astronaut biographies.) For some of the later flights undertaken by the Mercury 13, I used NASA in-flight transcripts to get a feel for the

technical dialogue at various points during the mission. Technical information about the spacecraft came from Apogee Books' amazing series of NASA Mission Reports.

Sometimes, the writing itself throws up avenues of research. I'm looking for something to bring a scene alive, but none of the books, or online resources I've used, have what I need. So I look elsewhere. Recently, I've been working on a story about a mission to Mars by Yuri Gagarin. At one point during the writing, I dropped in a reference to a piece of Soviet science fiction… And that inspired me to throw in as many such references as I could find – which necessitated researching Soviet sf literature and film online, and even purchasing several paperback anthologies of Soviet sf from eBay…

The detail I pull from the books I consult allows me to give the prose the sort of rich texture I value in the books I read, a verisimilitude, an authority, an indication of what the environment being described is *really* like. It was important to me when writing the Apollo Quartet that I captured as closely as I could the experience of walking on the Moon, or being on EVA in a spacesuit, or flying in an Apollo spacecraft. Obviously, I've not done any of these things myself; but a number of people have – and they've written about it. And it's in the details that the experience really comes across to the reader.

I sometimes refer to this as my 'nineteen turns' style of writing. In Thomas Stafford's autobiography, *We Have Capture* (2002), he writes about the deaths of cosmonauts Vladislav Volkov, Georgi Dobrovolski and Viktor Patsayev aboard Soyuz 11. After spending twenty-three days aboard Salyut 1, the crew were asphyxiated when the spacecraft slowly depressurised during preparations for re-entry. Stafford mentions that the valve responsible for this could have been manually closed using a handle stored under one of the seats. It would have taken *nineteen turns* to seal the faulty valve. It's a detail which tells you, without a shadow of a doubt, that Stafford knows his stuff, that he's spent time in a Soyuz (albeit for training purposes only – for ASTP, the Apollo-Soyuz link-up in orbit; he never flew in one). In my research, I'm always on the look out for those 'nineteen turns' details which I can use in my writing.

Since I discovered THE SECRET, I've written several stories based around variations on the US space programme. I've also written about flying boats. I've written about the Air Transport Auxiliary, about Nazi occult science, about Colonel John Paul Stapp and his rocket sleds. My ideas book is full of topics I've stumbled across that I want to use in fiction – from underwater habitats to V-Bombers to fairy wasps to saturation diving. The writing is going to be hard work, and I may never get something publishable out of it… but at least I know the research will be fun.

FIN

AN APOLOGY ON BEHALF OF THE BSFA

Several FOCUS readers got in touch shortly after FOCUS #61 arrived in their December 2013 mailing due to a great many printing issues with the magazine, especially with Ian Sales' lead article: "Everything You Wanted To Know About Self-Publishing And Small Presses But No One Would Tell You" (pgs 4-18). As has now become evident, this was a widespread issue that did not come to light beforehand, or with the original proof supplied.

In particular, we would like to apologise to Ian Sales, guest editor of FOCUS #61, whose time and effort in compiling and editing the material was very much appreciated by us all.

Here is a link to a full complimentary PDF copy (4.5MB) of the magazine via Scribd, and we hope you'll agree that the quality of the PDF is far removed from that of the printed version, but we would still like to apologise for any and all issues re. the layout and design of the content. We messed up.

http://www.scribd.com/doc/226452194/BSFA-FOCUS-Magazine-No-61

As always, your feedback and opinions are much appreciated: *focusmag@mangozine.com*