

FOCUS Magazine #65, Winter 2015/16

# FOCUS

THE BRITISH SCIENCE FICTION ASSOCIATION'S MAGAZINE FOR WRITERS

Labyrinths

Magic

Editing

Crafting

Poetry

Feelings

Meta

Workshops

And More!

SUMMER/AUTUMN 2016 No. 66



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# FOCUS

## DEV AGARWAL SAYS...

**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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Welcome to the Summer/Autumn issue of *Focus*.

We are living in an era so strange and alien it feels like an imagined future, yet it's actually our present. As Britain was almost numerically evenly split over the EU referendum, presumably half the country thinks that the best possible future awaits us, while the other half feels like we're falling over the side of a cliff. Dickens, "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times..." fully realised.

Either way, when we enter a state of flux or culture shock, the mainstream comes to us for the terminology and concepts to make sense of it. Even the term *Brexit* sounds like a genre term and the struggle for leadership in two major political parties in Britain is described repeatedly in *Game of Thrones'* metaphors.

This is a strange era, brimming with instability and questions not just in the UK but globally -- and the toolkit for its navigation may well lie with science fiction. While the EU, our economy, migration and politics are not the purpose of *Focus*, they remain our context now. We don't know where we're headed, but writers are always going to be called upon to commentate. So, returning to *Focus*, we come to the principles of advice. The BSFA has asked for the contributors' help, and they've responded across a vast range of specialisms and experience. In *Focus*, we speak with one voice in that we're all contributing to a single discussion about genre writing, and with many voices in that our opinions are diverse and sometimes contradictory. Contradiction, in this context should be seen as our strength, not a flaw. We aim to offer something for everyone in each issue, and so we have writers

revisiting previous themes, or bringing new perspectives, or even disagreeing with past contributors. Many of us have learned, either as readers or writers, that there are no hard and fast rules when it comes to writing either fiction or non-fiction. They are both arts and they both require constant reflection and challenge. As with any art, we must keep working and exploring our toolkit to develop our expertise.

That lack of rules looks like it has a wider resonance with our current string of global change and crises. If we don't know what the future will be, we need to think as widely as possible about what we put in our toolkit for writing about it.

**— Dev Agarwal**  
**September 2016**



**I love myths. I make no bones about it. Be it Greek, Hindu or Nordic, it offers us gods; superheroes that can fly, shape-shift, wield immense weapons and control the elements. Except they're not super. They're fallible, flawed beings, as subject to love, jealousy, lust and wrath as mortal man. Prometheus, the Titan god, stole the secret of fire from Olympus to give to man, whom he made from clay. King of the gods, Zeus, punished him with the daily torture of having his liver torn out.**

My favourite in this series is *Weight* by Jeanette Winterson, the story of Atlas, the Titan god of endurance and astronomy. Winterson herself says a recurring language motif of *Weight* is "I want to tell the story again" and using this motif she explores Atlas' loneliness and isolation and how he finds companionship in Laika, the dog sent into space through the Soviet space programme. ("Atlas has long ago ceased to feel the weight of the world he carried, but he felt the skin and bone of this little dog. Now he was carrying something he wanted to keep, and that changed everything.")

# HEART OF THE Labyrinth: MYTH AS THE STARTING POINT FOR STORY TELLING

BY PRIYA SHARMA

**Priya Sharma** just won the British Fantasy Award for Best Short Fiction for "Fabulous Beasts" (published by Tor.com). She takes us now on a journey into the origins of fiction, the mythic and how we might draw on it still for new and genre storytelling.

In *Spin*, which won the BSFA Award last year, Nina Allan's alternative Greece shimmers off the page as she weaves her own variation of the Arachne myth:

"The afternoons were hot, but she relished the heat, even in the city centre where every ironwork bench and stone-flagged entranceway seemed to magnify it. Once the shutters came down on the meat markets and the garbage trucks had done their rounds the streets became quiet, criss-crossed with knife-edged shadows, patrolled softly by cats. People trod softly then also, as if afraid of waking the giants that according to legend slumbered away the days in the north abandoned oil refineries and factory wastelands to the north of the city."

It's a world where creation can be an act of prophecy, a gift punishable by death. Allan explores art, self-expression, volition, transformation and

divinity via her protagonist, Layla, who denies her birthright with "I'm not a savant. I'm a weaver. And the gods are dead."

There's also *The Minotaur Takes a Cigarette Break* by Steve Sherrill. A terrified Theseus bargains for his life, resulting in the Minotaur being freed from the labyrinth. The Minotaur, now known as M, flips burgers in a diner and lives in a trailer park. Winterson's exploration of isolation takes us into space, while Sherrill keeps us earthbound by examining the aching loneliness of the outsider in a crowd. M is out of step with modern life, suffering from that most human difficulty- the struggle to make oneself understood:

"No matter how sweetly worded or wise the Minotaur's ideas may be, when he puts them to tongue, terrible things happen. In the clear field of his mind things are precise. But when filtered through the deep resonating chambers of his nostrils, pushed up the cavernous expanse of his throat and across the thick bovine tongue, his words come out tortured and

Mythology offers us the birth of the world. A cypher for the cycles of nature. A framework for death. The Egyptian sun god, Ra, was born from the sky goddess and at nightfall entered the underworld, only to be reborn the next morning. In Hindu myths we have Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva, who are creator, maintainer and destroyer of the universe respectively, keeping birth and death in balance.

On an academic level they are an important charter of the culture and psyche of the period in which they were written. For example, the Vikings gave meaning to their death by promise of a seat in Valhalla, where they could spend eternity feasting and fighting. A fitting afterlife for a nation of warriors.

In 2005, *The Myth Series* ([www.themyths.co.uk](http://www.themyths.co.uk)) was launched, an international project dedicated to the retelling of legendary tales that includes work by Margaret Atwood, Victor Pelevin, Alexander McCall Smith, Su Tong and Philip Pullman.

mutilated – deep, nasal, almost whining. The Minotaur is painfully self-conscious of how he speaks. Over the years he's come to depend on contextual grunts, which suffice most of the time."

He is pitied, ridiculed and vilified by turns, where "Five thousand years he would have devoured them all. These pitifully arrogant boys and girls would have quaked at the mere mention of his name."

However, it is *The Lost Books of the Odyssey* that struck me in particular.

In his preface, Zachary Mason tells us that Homer's *The Odyssey* is the organisation of a myriad of myths. Mason used Homer as a jumping off point to go back to the source material with a pre-Ptolemaic papyrus containing "forty-four concise variations on Odysseus' story that omit stock epic formulae in favour of honing a single trope or image down to an extreme of clarity".

Mason pays homage to these variations in forty-four chapters, each one with a different theme and flavour. Both mystical and immediate, the narrative swaps between first and third person. He deconstructs *The Odyssey*, taking the shattered pieces that are war, love, memory, sex and death and reassembling them into a series that charts Odysseus' journey to Ithaca and the ends of himself.

Mason not only works to depict Odysseus and his journey, but also the whole panoply that attends him -- Penelope and her suitors, Agamemnon, Menelaus, Helen, Achilles and Calypso. Minor characters and monsters are moved to centre stage to reveal various facets of *The Odyssey*, such as Cassandra, cursed by Apollo to never be believed as she warns the Trojans of the coming war. Nothing is certain as characters often change guises themselves. And a happy welcome in Ithaca isn't always guaranteed. The ingredients are malleable. Penelope's dead. She's alive. She's a lycanthrope. She's remarried and startled by Odysseus' return. Or Penelope isn't his wife at all. Through trickery, Odysseus married Helen instead. Or is it Athena that's the love of his life as well as his guiding light? This constant reinvention demands a different kind of engagement from its readers, making us reassess different aspects and nuances of the story and the characters. This may seem like literary trickery but as a writer I find it fascinating because it squeezes far more from the stock tale.

For example, Odysseus himself isn't the stuff of Hollywood. He varies from chapter to chapter. He's a coward and a deserter who makes his way home as a bard. He is an insomniac, becoming literally Nobody, as



Priya Sharma's fiction has appeared in *Albedo One*, *Interzone*, *Black Static* and on *Tor.com*. She's been anthologised in several of Ellen Datlow's *Best Horror of the Year* series, Paula Guran's *Year's Best Dark Fantasy & Horror* series, Jonathan Strahan's *The Best Science Fiction & Fantasy 2014*, Steve Haynes' *Best British Fantasy 2014* and Johnny Main's *Best British Horror 2015*. She's also been on the Locus' Recommended Reading Lists (2010, 2012, 2013 & 2015).

Her own myth based stories include a modern take on Medusa called *Pearls* (*Interzone* Issue 246/ *Year's Best Dark Fantasy & Horror 2013*) and the Minotaur with *Thesea and Astaurius* (*Bourbon Penn* Issue 4/*Best British Fantasy 2014*).

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he famously named himself to the Cyclops. Elsewhere Paris is Death incarnate and Odysseus leaps from a tree, rope around his neck, so that he may enter the Hades that is Troy and persuade Helen to return with him:

*Mythology offers us the birth of the world. A cypher for the cycles of nature. A framework for death.*

"They left Ithaca on a mirror-clear night, the ships sweeping through black water and reflected stars. Soon the dark hulls ground on the sands of Ilium, Death's country, the white sails were furled, and they leaped down onto the shingle with weapons in hand. The sand crackled underfoot -- Odysseus scooped up a handful and saw that it was made up of ground bone, tiny fragments of tooth, skull and vertebrae."

Mason deftly questions the nature of *The Odyssey* itself, again and again. As coward-bard, it occurs to Odysseus that "...I had in my hands the means of making myself an epic hero." He travels home, living large on lies about his heroism and it is one of his reinventions that endures as *The Odyssey*. Alternatively, our hero is dead and *The Odyssey* is his afterlife of choice, a gift from Athena ("He did not want to know that he was a ghost... Let trials and cruel kings and monsters come, he said, and let them all be overcome at the last second.")

One entire chapter is an essay on the lineage of chess. If *The Iliad* is a chess manual then *The Odyssey* is "...a treatise on tactics to be used after the game has ended... One of the few surviving pieces is Odysseus, inching across the crumbling board towards his home square."

Zachary Mason might be likened to the Odysseuses that he crafts himself, an unreliable narrator who reinvents the story as he goes, fragment by fragment, to create something complete and satisfying. His hero looks back on his adventure as he revisits Troy, finding comfort when he mistakes a trashy souvenir for Achilles' shield. He flings it into the sea rather than take it home. "For a moment it seemed to hang motionless in the air and I wondered if my gesture had somehow permitted me to step out of time...". Mason appears to be telling

us that we aren't just defined by the artefacts we leave behind. It's what enters into legend that illuminates our legacy. Which makes me curious. What will remain from our storytelling culture in another 10,000 years?

Mason's short chapters force an economy of language that's worth studying. He evokes Ithaca with "The smell of the island had not changed- oak, heat, sea, stone – which heartened Odysseus as his white-sailed ship dropped anchor." The Trojan war and Achilles are summed up in a few lines:

"...a small, cramped tent with the lamplight shining on Achilles' obdurate frowning face, the warm glow of his armour, the shadows on the worried faces of his bent crowd of supplicants. The humming arrows as they darkened the sky above us. The interior of the horse, confined and creaking like the hold of a ship."

I urge you to read this book. It's more than a series of short stories masquerading as a novel. It's a lesson in the writer's craft, offering a bold alternative to the linear narrative that rival's writers such as Cavalino. Its segmented style allows Mason to change point of view and focus, all the better for exploring his themes. Chief among which is the very nature of story tellers themselves and it's only when we question ourselves, our inner nature and truths, that our writing is truly illuminated.

Other recommended myth based works:

*The Palace of Illusions* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

*Achilles* by Elizabeth Cook

*The Song of Achilles* by Madeline Miller

*Ragnarok* by A.S. Byatt

## Recommendations...

**Leigh Kennedy** is a Nebula nominee and author of *Faces*, *The Journal of Nicholas the American* and *Wind Angels*. Her writing is described by John Clute as succinct, polished, and lucent. Here she offers five recommendations for *Focus* readers...

1. **Point of View:** 'Flowers for Algernon' (short story) or *Charley* (the expanded novel version) by Daniel Keyes has strong emotional impact through the use of a close, personal viewpoint in an evolving mind.
2. **Idea/Theme:** Octavia Butler could take a scientific or social notion and turn it into a masterful thesis of extrapolation (see *Wild Seed* or *Kindred*).
3. **Language:** *everything* by Gene Wolfe.
4. **Character:** even the most minor characters invented by Charles Dickens are vividly drawn and his major characters become enduring, lifelong acquaintances.
5. **Plot.** I'm going to borrow from my daughter, Elizabeth, here who says of *Holes* by Louis Sachar that it has the most perfect plot and the tiniest details in the beginning are significant in the end. I have enjoyed it myself as well and understand why she's so enthusiastic.

**We hope to see Leigh contribute an article in future.**

**Editing. In the old days I would have described it as “being on the other side of the desk” but now I say that it goes like this: You’re sitting there composing your brilliant story which you then email off to an editor. That editor sits on it for far too long before getting back to you with a curt “No” or a form rejection or sometimes no response at all. And you see the pieces they pick and you think what the heck...? Then you start to wonder if you could do a better editing job yourself.**

copy”. Having everything drop through the letterbox, however, brought its own snags and issues: the most prevalent of these was that little yellow label that The Post Office delights in affixing to brown envelopes with the legend “Insufficient Postage”. This meant a Saturday morning trip to the sorting office and an on the spot fine of £1.16 per item. Often I would weigh the package at home and find that in fact the correct amount of stamps had been affixed but probably old Postman Pat was too lazy-arse to deliver the C4 envelope.

# DON'T UPSET YOUR EDITOR

BY ALLEN ASHLEY

A long established editor and writer, **Allen Ashley**, provides us with an inside perspective on what editors do, and crucially, how writers should approach them.

Some authors sent me multiple stories. I think six in one go happened on a few occasions. Indeed, many poetry mags ask for a small selection of your work but with almost all anthologies the editor only wants to see your one best or most appropriate short story. If you send multiple submissions, there is a clear danger that they will only read the top story in the pile, if they read any of them at all. The truth is: if you have already failed to follow the guidelines, editors will assume that you're not an author they could work with. If you catch the editor in a good mood and they *do* read all your submissions, the problem is that you may be judged by the lowest quality sub out of the

Give it a go, is my advice; and not simply because we writers need as many new markets as possible.

Editing is an eye-opener and an education. In modern jargon, it can be a “steep learning curve”. No matter how tightly you write the guidelines, questions will pop into your inbox that you couldn't have anticipated and that you may struggle to answer. Will you look at illustrated work / will you consider translations / can I send you my play script...?

I'm old school. After being a professionally published writer for some 16 or 17 years, I undertook my first small-scale editorial project. It was meant to be an actual book but then my publisher unaccountably got cold feet and I had to scale down the project into what became “The Millennium Supplement” in Trevor Denyer's “Roadworks” magazine (1999). As this was intended for release for the millennial celebrations in 2000, the project was themed, pertinent and time-specific. One of my favourite editorial inclusions was a Tim Lebbon story in which the turning of the century is greeted by quietude rather than raucous celebrating. For that project and a couple that succeeded it – including the BFS award-winning *The Elastic Book Of Numbers* (Elastic Press, 2005) – I took postal submissions only. I often read subs on the tube to and from my day job. Kindles and i-phones hadn't been invented back then so I read what nowadays is referred to as “hard

bunch. At the very best they might think that they “quite liked the single but wouldn't buy the album”.

When I upgraded to email submissions that brought its own headaches. I've guest-edited a couple of magazines where I was happy to look at poetry, artwork, even video content with the online treasure that is “Sein und Werden”, but for all the anthologies that I've edited – for Elastic Press, PS Publishing, Eibonvale Press, The Alchemy Press and, most recently, Shadow Publishing – I've been seeking short stories. Not novels. Not poetry. Not illustrated work. Not graphic stories. I pride myself on writing clear and transparent guidelines (*GLs*). If I say maximum 6000 words, that's exactly what I mean. Please don't think: oh I'm so great the guidelines don't apply to me. You're not; and they do. Please don't think that it's OK just this one time for my story to be outside the word count; it isn't. Editors are constrained by various factors regarding how long each piece should be and how long the final book will be. The word count has not been set arbitrarily; it's a rule not a suggestion. Collar one of your favourite authors at a reading or a convention and you'll find that actually they got where they are today by being able to adhere to GLs and use that constriction as a spur to writing something memorable, something that stands out.

Becoming an editor won't cost you your friendships but you may find yourself in the awkward position of

having to reject your mates. They may feel you've gone over to the other side. (You may wish you had!) You can always ask them for a rewrite. If you do, be clear and specific about what you want. What was the part that snagged or sagged? How could they improve it? When I ask for rewrites I am showing that there is at least something in the story that has got underneath my skin but I am not necessarily committing to accept the rewritten version. Usually there's a happy outcome because the writer will do a quick but thorough job when addressing my concerns but it's not a given.

Any writer long enough in the tooth to call themselves a writer will have faced up to plenty of rejection. It will continue to form a variable percentage of your life unless you become Stephen King famous. I always advise the participants in my writing groups to have a good swear in private and then get rewriting or resubmitting. They might even email the editor and politely thank her/him for taking the time to consider their story. I always get a few of those at the end of my projects. What the writer should not do is rant, rave, demand an explanation or apology from the editor. The editor has read and rejected your masterpiece. No amount of emotional blackmail, no sob story, no demand to be reread, no irate "how could you?" and no iteration of the true depth and meaning of your story is going to change the editor's mind. I have a maxim that I follow at poetry readings and it also applies here: Never explain, never justify. If you're motivated to write and tell the editor that he/she didn't understand your story then actually you need to be motivated to rewrite the story and make it something that the intelligent editor and reader will understand.

As an editor, you should not be bothered about being bad-mouthed by anyone. The haters just create a hollow mirror for themselves. And we editors talk together, passing on experiences both good and unsavoury. Swear into the dustbin and be done with it.

Sometimes I'll reject a story and the author will get back to me and say well, ha-ha to you because "Black Static" / "Postscripts" / "The 100 Most Obvious Zombie Stories" loved it, so how are you feeling now, Allen?

Pretty fine, actually. If I don't want your story and someone else does, good luck to you. Acting like I've rejected your advances and you've gone off and married Lewis Hamilton won't change my opinion at all.

Something else I learned early on is: don't reject too soon. This is not a case of a nasty editor holding on to your precious story as long as he can just to keep a carrot of hope dangling in front of you. No. What used to happen to me quite often was: I'd reject a story and the very next day or even by return of email the author would send me another submission. Really? On theme? Written specifically? Of good quality? In under an hour...?

I don't want to sound like a Dodo but technology has changed the submission game. When it was postal, everything was just a tad slower so I didn't have such an instant contact. So it was more plausible that the writer was thinking more carefully. Now, instantaneous,



**Allen Ashley's** latest books are as editor of *Sensorama: Stories of the Senses* (Eibonvale Press, 2015) and *Creeping Crawlers* (Shadow Publishing, 2015). He is "Special Projects" officer and Short Story Competition judge for the British Fantasy Society. This year's competition opened on 1 April 2016. He runs five creative writing groups across north London including Clockhouse London Writers.

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<http://clockhouselondonwriters.wordpress.com/>

time-stamped emails mean I can see precisely how long the gap was between correspondence. Put simply: if an editor rejects your work at 3pm, she/he doesn't expect you to boot a new offering into the inbox by 3.05 and will be very suspicious if you do so. Oh goodness, I kind of hate myself for saying this but, having been burned a few times, I now tend to reject *after* the submission window has closed.

But really editing, and its related pastime judging, is an absolute joy. Gradually putting an anthology together, thinking about flow or story order, liaising with writers, publisher, cover artist, rereading all the possibles, microscopically considering all the likelies – is fantastic.

Something else to bear in mind is to give yourself a realistic time-frame. It has sometimes taken me up to two years from the initial kernel of the idea all the way through to the finished book. To do a decent job, I would say one year minimum. At the British Fantasy Society's Fantasy Con in 2014 I got chatting again to David Sutton who runs his own independent press Shadow Publishing. By the end of the weekend he had asked me if I would like



to edit an anthology for his press. I told him I already had something in mind. So, once I got home I sent him a formal proposal. We then spent a couple of weeks agreeing guidelines. By now it was late September, 2014. I was still busy with my previous project, for which I'd pushed back the publication date. David and I agreed to start the publicity rolling in December and then open for submissions on 1<sup>st</sup> January 2015. A three-month window meant that I could spend much of April and May sifting and choosing. By the end of June I'd have the complete anthology ready. Of course, it didn't quite happen like that and I think it was well into July before I'd got all of the final approved and agreed versions ready to send. There are always minor issues to solve – formatting, copyright queries and, a regular for me, pleas to my publisher to ask: Can I squeeze one more great story into the book? But I'd built in enough flexibility so that we had some space to manoeuvre. Then there were the cover options to consider, the PDF to read, the launch to organise. But we were ready well on time for a launch of *Creeping Crawlers* at, closing the circle neatly, Fantasy Con 2015. Technically it was 13 months but don't tell anyone.

Of course, there will be plenty of other things going on at the same time –between pitching *Crawlers* and publishing it, I guest-edited "Sein und Werden" and judged the BFS Short Story Competition. All I'm saying is: give yourself a realistic time-frame. And, if you can, enjoy all the admin that comes with the job.

There are two joys of editing that form the Holy Grail for editors. The first is discovering a new voice, being able to give someone their first or a very early opportunity to be read in a good quality anthology, perhaps even sharing the pages with some famous names in the genre. So in *Creeping Crawlers* I've got heavyweights Dennis Etchison and Storm Constantine alongside debutant Robin Lupton. I don't think I'm ever too far away from my younger self who was thrilled to break into *Fantasy Tales* and even happier to be later reprinted in *The Best Horror From Fantasy Tales* alongside Clive Barker, Ramsey Campbell and, again, Dennis Etchison. It is an honour to be able to offer somebody else that early opportunity.

The other major buzz is one you'll probably all be familiar with and it's the jaw-drop, the wow moment, the "I wish I'd written that" story. And someone has sent it to me, inspired by my guidelines, and would I be so kind as to consider it a possible for my anthology? It's the stories one envies that one remembers. I've been privileged enough to publish very many of these during my time as an editor but I'm going to cite one example:

"Approaching Zero" by John Lucas from my *The Elastic Book Of Numbers* (Elastic Press, 2005). This was a brilliant piece of satirical SF, a disaster story predicated upon the simple notion of: what if consumer society fell apart because we all stopped buying things and instead reduced our assets to... well, zero? There's a memorable moment in this story where the Tony Blairesque Prime Minister goes on TV during the crisis to appeal for calm:

"Our project (as we're now calling it) was on the evening news again, but this time as the main story, not the light-hearted filler at the end. All across the world, vital services are grinding to a halt as the employees who run them choose to stay at home and dispose of their excess material goods. Shares are in freefall, and serious-minded sociology professors are speculating on whether society can continue to function if the population loses its interest in the beads and gewgaws of global capitalism. The Prime Minister has appealed for calm, which is strange, because we *are* calm. He was the one who seemed upset."

("Approaching Zero" – John Lucas)

I wasn't alone in my admiration for this piece as it was short-listed for a BFS award for "Best Short Fiction".

Of course, my experiences of editing – and its close cousin, judging – are those of a freelancer moving from project to project. There are other avenues that are worth exploring, such as internship. Some magazines and independent publishers are open to the idea of letting someone learn the ropes from the inside. This is generally unpaid but it's valuable experience nevertheless.

I always encourage people to give editing a try. Perhaps this translates as: start up a magazine or edit an anthology, pal; so that I've got somewhere new to send my next story. Seriously though, editing can give you a new perspective on the genre and the intricacies of acquiring, appraising, selecting, fine editing, publishing, launching and publicising new fiction. You may well have your horizons broadened. I used to complain 'til dawn about editors. Nowadays: writers are the bane of my life! I've given you the guidelines; now get on with conjuring some alchemical magic to impress me. You know you want to.

Thanks for reading.

*...editing can give you a new perspective on the genre and the intricacies of acquiring, appraising, selecting, fine editing, publishing, launching and publicising...*

# Inter/Action...

A section for letters, opinion, and reader comments...

Last issue, **Andrew Hook**, author of *Church of Wire*, wrote about characters, scene and conflict, when writing short fiction.

This prompted long time BSFA member **Sue Thomason** to reply.

Dear FOCUS

*Once again I must write to disagree with the idea that conflict is an essential ingredient of an interesting story. (See Andrew Hook's informative article on short story writing.) I feel this may be a relatively recent assumption, I wonder if it's an outgrowth of a "Western"/developed world/colonialist outlook, and I think it is damaging for both writers and readers.*

*In science fiction, the classic short-story schemas are a) "What if..?" and b) problem-solving (with a preference for solving problems caused by new technology, or using new technology to solve problems). In longer-form science fiction one characteristic motivation is exploration (of an unfamiliar/alien landscape and/or culture) which can bleed over into anthropology and travel writing, and/or discovery. In fantasy, the classic plot turning-point is transformation, which can be sudden or gradual. In both genres, the main emotional goal of many stories is not to rack up tension (anger/fear, readiness to fight) but to evoke sensawonda. It's an amazing cosmos we have out there/in here.*

*In many stories from both genres, the goal of the story is reconciliation or resolution, the gaining of knowledge or experience or wisdom or understanding, or a stable, joyful relationship, or a just society, or any number of other wonderful things. And the goal is what we're looking at – what we want from the story – where we want to get to. What we look at is what we get. If we go out looking for fights, we'll get fights. I really want to minimise the number of fights in my life. Fighting/winning/losing is in many situations an unhelpful metaphor. and one our society seems to have got locked into (as in "winning the battle against (insert metaphorical enemy here)").*

*This doesn't mean I want to read stories in which nothing interesting ever happens. But I really do wonder whether "narrative conflict" is a) more often than not used as a metaphor for something that isn't an actual fight, b) a tired and overworked metaphor. New ways of looking at things sought, please!*

**Sue Thomason**

**Andrew Hook** responds:

Dear Sue

*Many thanks for giving me the chance to respond to Sue's comments on my article. I agree with several issues that she has raised, and understand the dichotomy she has regarding a story where the goal might not appear to contain conflict. I think our key disagreement and where I hope to provide clarification is over the definition of 'conflict'. I use the word myself from the Alea's Well writing exercise devised by a friend of mine, David Allen Lambert, as mentioned in my article – however I might change this term as I can see the word could itself cause conflict!*

*Conflict does not need to imply a fight – or any kind of obvious altercation – but simply something which should be resolved. To use Sue's example of an SF story where exploration of a new world is the focus, the conflict could simply be rendered as 'there is a new land to explore'. Combined with character and scene, this story could be an examination into how new world differences conflict with old world experience. It is the interaction of these three factors which would make the story. However, if the use of the word conflict itself is too harsh for subtlety, then we still should find a word which does the job because a prompt for character and scene to do anything more than sit as descriptive prose is a necessity. For the purposes of the writing exercise in my article, I would suggest plot would imply too much of a synopsis, but perhaps trigger or action could become a sufficient prompt.*

*It is just a question of semantics, however, as I remain to be convinced that a story might exist which is purely character and scene without an additional factor to move it along; but let's also remember that my article is based on creating a writing exercise which definitely generates story. And something must happen – I believe – for there to be such a story.*

For further reading: <http://theeditorsblog.net/2015/02/07/get-pushy-push-character-conflict-and-reader-emotion/> (I don't necessarily agree with these comments, but **Focus** readers might find it of further interest).

**Andrew Hook**  
[www.andrew-hook.com](http://www.andrew-hook.com)  
<http://andrew-hook.blogspot.co.uk/>

We're always very interested to hear more from BSFA members about what you make of **Focus** and individual contributions.

Please feel free to send us your feedback to the editor at:

**[Devhotmail@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:Devhotmail@yahoo.co.uk)**

Thank you to Sue and Andrew for holding this debate in *Focus* and for taking the discussion in Andrew's article further.

Yet a third perspective might come from an article on Robert McKee in the Guardian recently:

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/sep/10/creative-writing-lesson-god-of-story-robert-mckee-tim-lott>

**Robert McKee** is known to his followers as the "God of Story." In his interview with Tim Lott, McKee also discussed the origin and ingredients of fiction. He begins by discussing how drama arises when we make: "value-laden choices under pressure. It is through these choices that we find out who we are – since all of us live under the cover of masks, which hide ourselves from others, and even ourselves. Every lived moment of human life is a multi-layered event taking place at a number of different levels – interpersonal, internal, societal, institutional. Story, then, is the sea in which all of us swim, and dramatists, screenwriters and novelists create "story" with the boring bits of life cut out. In story nothing moves forward except through conflict, and stories are metaphors for life – because to be alive is to be in perpetual conflict."

McKee would therefore put himself in the camp of seeing conflict as at the heart of fiction and storytelling, with conflict, or "perpetual conflict" being a particularised use of the term. McKee also told the Guardian that "Story design means choices – boiling down from life, far more material [than] you could ever use. A story is a series of events that have been chosen then composed. Like composing music."

Which suggests there is, as Sue argues above, more to story than conflict in the sense of fighting, as McKee goes on to speculate that: "An event is a meaningful choice; that is, a choice with a value at stake. Values are at the heart of storytelling. A binary of human experience, positive or negative, truth and lies, love and hate, war and peace – all are binaries. They shift charge constantly. An event – in story terms – equals meaningful change in the value-charged condition of a character's life, achieved through conflict."

Conflict, events, choices and binaries. If any reader would like to respond further, please let us know.

**Dev Agarwal**

**“An army”, Napoléon Bonaparte is alleged to have said, “marches on its stomach.” He was talking about the importance of good supply lines, but the underlying significance of the statement is rooted in the question of resources. And the same is true of a world, real or fictional. A world, like Napoléon’s soldiers, is dependent upon the resources it possesses and the ways those are created, employed, distributed and consumed – its economic infrastructure, to use a technical term. The economy is the engine of a society, and that society might be a city, a kingdom, a colony planet or a space station. For a fictional world to be plausible, it needs to make sense – and a world whose economics don’t or can’t work is a world that sooner or later, will trip someone – the writer, the editor, the reader – up and kick them out of the story.**

meals at the touch of a button (to this day I remain convinced that the food on the Starship Enterprise breaks the laws of thermodynamics).

Food may seem like a minor place to start in designing a world. But what people eat depends on the nature of where they live, and it is closely allied to culture. The difficulty presented by finding or growing food shapes enormous parts of society, too. How much labour is needed to produce enough for one meal? For ten? To feed a village for a year? Are extra hands welcome, or are extra mouths feared? It will depend on the fertility of the local soil, the level of technology, the local climate. Larger settlements require more resources, which they need to acquire through trade or conquest or more technology. Settlements in cold exposed upland areas with thin soil and limited sunlight would fail if they tried to survive on crops that need warmth and good soil and long months of sunshine. And sheep

are unlikely on a space station (except possibly Ringworld), though if someone would like to write a sheep-in-space story and make it work, I’d love to read it, because space shepherds are an interesting image. That hypothetical upland village may well raise sheep, however, and sheep products – wool, milk and cheese, mutton – are likely to be key resources for them, both in terms of what they eat and what they trade to others, what they wear, and how their neighbours see them. The dwarves of Discworld eat a diet that reflects the conditions in which they lived, historically -- rats and bread that is very damp resistant. So far, so shaped by landscape, like the sheep village. But Pratchett customises the conditions of his dwarf mines to create a culture that is distinctively Discworld, – rat

on a stick and bread that is more

weapon than foodstuff. The economics of landscape and access are there, but what matters is the detail that Pratchett adds. Details of culture and landscape play off against each other, expressed through the ways in which the characters relate to them. Tolkien’s food-loving hobbits live in the fertile Shire, and are as devoted to growing food as they are to eating it. Or, at least, to ensuring it is grown, because the Shire throws up another aspect of world building that is rooted in the economy – the division of labour.

The Shire – and, indeed, most of Middle Earth – is a stratified society, and those strata are defined by occupation and by access to resources. Neither Bilbo nor Frodo Baggins grow their own vegetables – they have the Gamgee family to do that for them. They own

# BEING ECONOMICAL WITH THE WORLDS WE BUILD

BY KARI SPERRING

At the heart of any fictional setting is world building. **Kari Sperring**, writer and academic, looks at a key aspect of world building, the economics that underpin it. Without getting those right, the world itself may fall flat...

Most writers don’t sit down and worry about the GDP of every city or planet they imagine. But we do need to think about the details that affect the story. How many and how important they are will depend on the length of the project: far less depth is usually needed for a short story than for a novel. As much as Napoleon’s Grande Armée, the fictional world marches on its stomach and that stomach needs to be filled – and many people within that world must inevitably be engaged in ensuring that happens. It’s a cliché in many fantasies that kingdoms are filled with peasants – either happy or oppressed, usually, for many fantasists can be rather lazy about social class. We seldom see them, but they are there, growing crops and raising animals. Spaceships have hydroponics suites and vats to grow protein, or quasi-magical food dispensers that provide

property and land – and, eventually, dragon gold – which mean that they don't need to work. The dwarves of Middle Earth are craftspeople, mining the resources of their homelands to produce goods for trade – but as with the hobbits, some dwarves are higher status than others, apparently depending on how big a share of the resources they possess. Like a lot of fantasy writers, Tolkien modelled his societies on a selection of historical and mythological cultures and relies on reader familiarity with at least some aspects of those to fill in detail. (I would still like to know what lembas is made of and how it's made since elves don't seem to farm, and, outside Mirkwood, most of them seem to be too aristocratic to cook. My partner Phil swears that there is a whole subculture of elves who back guests into corners at parties to talk about permaculture and organic spelt, and he may be right.) But while Tolkien does not tell us about elven agriculture, he remembers economics and resources where it matters: the Nine Walkers have to worry about food supplies, as does the besieged city of Gondor, and Thorin's dwarves are driven in part to try and regain the Lonely Mountain by poverty and rootlessness.

Pratchett works from historical and legendary cultures, too, but with more cynicism – and more realism. The ordinary people of Überwald are deeply sceptical about their local bloodsucking aristocrats, and are prone to mobs, pitchforks and stakings – which is both funny and a rather sharp comment on feudal culture. The colony world in Jacey Bedford's Psi-Tech series has a class system which is partly pre-created by the expectations of the settlers – who are trying to reproduce Northern European farming culture seen through a lens of the settlers' own idealism, complete with leader and elders – and by the more critical hierarchy that arises when the settlers find they need the more specialised technical and scientific skills possessed by the crew of the starship on which they travelled. But both groups need each other to survive – the scientists and technicians need to eat, just as the settlers need machinery and medicine.

The balance of resources in the Psi-Tech series is part of the texture of the world that Bedford creates, but in this particular instance, access to resources is also the engine for the plot. Crew, settlers and antagonists are all engaged in seeking to control the resources of the colony planet and a wider set of resources possessed by various characters, too. The structure of the series, and the tension within it, is created by the attention that Bedford pays to the economics of its society.

The same is true of Kate Elliott's Crossroads series, which is a fantasy which explores the effect of war on ordinary people. The powerful in her world struggle to control its most valuable products, both material – wealth, land – and intangible – law, magic. Elliott's protagonists, however, are mainly those on the underside of this struggle: the poor, the farmers and labourers, slaves, minor tradespeople and rank-and-file law-keepers. Their lives are transformed and often destroyed by the greed of their social 'superiors'. Starvation and deprivation stalk the pages of the



**Kari Sperring** grew up dreaming of joining the musketeers and saving France, only to discover that the company had been disbanded in 1776. Disappointed, she became a historian instead and as Kari Maund has written and published five books and many articles on Celtic and Viking history and co-authored a book on the history and real people behind her favourite novel, *The Three Musketeers* (with Phil Nanson). She has published short stories in several anthologies in the UK and US. Her first novel *Living with Ghosts* was published by DAW books in March 2009: her second, *The Grass King's Concubine*, comes out, also from DAW, in August 2012. She's currently at work on her third and fourth novels simultaneously, because she needs more complications in her life.

series as land is wasted, cities are destroyed and those who produce food are killed or displaced. Again, the economic infrastructure shapes the plot and provides much of the action. Elliott moreover uses the economies of the various cultures she has created to mark out differences between them in terms of food, expectations of hierarchy, and attitudes to slavery and female labour. Hers is a world like Tolkien's in which different hierarchies have developed over time, based on control of wealth and land and on the variety of landscape. But unlike Middle-Earth, there are no true, righteous kings whose presence ensures prosperity. Instead, monarchs promise either gradations of greed and compassion. Plot and world building intertwine in both to help create the elements the authors want – mythological sweep and resonance for Tolkien, social commentary for Elliott. In both, peoples from different cultures eat different foods and have different material cultures, deriving both from where they live and from distinctions in what they appreciate.

Environment and resources are tied so intimately together that they evolve from one another. Dwelling places are designed according to locally-available materials and climate as well as need. It is unlikely that desert dwellers will build a city out of wood (unless wood has a special meaning for those who live there and they have the time and wealth to import it in sufficient quantities). Similarly, in artificial environments – starships, space stations, or sealed habitats under water or on planets with poisonous atmospheres – space itself is a valuable resource and low priority areas are unlikely to be large. Living quarters may be small or shared or both: private possessions may be few. Social attitudes to property and living room will reflect this, too: perhaps privacy is seen as a form of greed, as abnormal or suspect.

Economic infrastructure forms the bones of a world, and often plays a key role in how cultural differences develop. The meat of the world – what people value, what they believe, what they fear, what and who they admire – is formed around it. But cultures express themselves in all sorts of ways. For Tolkien, a key part of world building was language: his various groups speak different languages, have different forms of nomenclature, utter different oaths and use different metaphors. The various elvish languages have many words relating to stars and starlight: they form names based on these. They value white gems and white metals, reflecting this love of stars. Their faith also centres around beings of light and in particular the lady of the heavens, Elbereth. Hobbit names tend to reflect a connexion to the earth, to nature, to geographical

features. Their vocabulary similarly tends to be down-to-earth (with the exception of the elf-loving Bilbo and Frodo). Tolkien was particularly interested in language to begin with: few other writers go to the same lengths in designing how peoples speak. But names matter and giving people from the same culture names that are consistent with each other goes a long way towards creating a sense of authenticity. Clothing and tools likewise can express culture, both through necessity – airtight suits for space walks, thick aprons worn by blacksmiths – and through context – decoration may reflect the local plant life, say.

Finally, nothing should be simply visual. We move every day through a world filled with sensory stimulæ. Characters in fictional settings likely do the same. Foodstuffs, raw materials, craft activities, engines, landscapes have scents and sounds and textures. It's a running joke in Jasper Ford's Thursday Next novels that characters in book-world have no sense of taste – based on the author's observation that what food or drink tastes like is seldom mentioned in fiction. But tastes, along with smells, are powerful triggers. A familiar foodstuff met in a strange place can conjure not simply enjoyment but a powerful sense of belonging, nostalgia and memory. (They probably don't register all of them all of the time – and too much detail can drown plot and pace in a book – but small details lend conviction to an imaginary place. What those may be depend on the nature of the world – on its resources and the uses those who live there make of them and on how you, as the writer, employ those details through the deeds and lives of the characters.

## Attention BSFA members!

The first round of the BSFA Awards nominations process is now open, and will remain so until 31st December. Your nominations will not be made public, and you are restricted to four nominations per category, so you may wish to use the *suggestions form* on the BSFA website to suggest your favourite works to other BSFA members as well – and you can make as many of those as you like.

**Who can nominate?** You may nominate a work if ***YOU are a member of the BSFA*** and send us your nominations by 31<sup>st</sup> December.

**What are the categories?**

**Best Novel**  
**Best Artwork**

**Best Short Fiction (40,000 words or under)**  
**Best Non-Fiction**

**How to nominate.** Nominations can be emailed to the Awards Administrator via [awards@bsfa.co.uk](mailto:awards@bsfa.co.uk) OR an electronic form for nominations is available at the link below, where you can also find more details about the categories, links to the suggestions form, a list of suggestions so far, and details about previous winners.

<http://www.bsfa.co.uk/bsfa-awards/nominate-for-the-bsfa-awards/>

From 1st January to 30th January the opportunity for members to vote for their shortlist **from the collated nominations** will be provided. This will be the second round. When the shortlist is published, both BSFA and Eastercon members will be able to vote until the day of the ceremony at Eastercon, which this year takes place at Birmingham Hilton Metropole.

In *Writing Fantasy and Science Fiction* (chapter 2, *Writer's Digest Books*, 2013), Orson Scott Card argues that writers should make rules for their worlds. According to him, before you can tell a meaningful story, you must have an understanding of the world in which it is set, the natural laws, history, geography, politics and so on. 'To tell stories perfectly you have to know everything about everything.' Many other editors and writers agree that writers of SF and fantasy need to work out far more about their invented worlds than appears on the page.

of humanity, a lost empire of dragons and wars between cities. The story is told from multiple points of view, including those of an apprentice banker, a mercenary captain and an apostate priest. Through their eyes, we are shown details which are relevant to their immediate situations but also build up a background of increasing complexity. Some of this is needed to explore the themes in which Abraham is interested, especially the relationship between politics, economics and religion. *The Dragon's Path* is the first in a series, so the details also help lay the ground for the later novels. But the thickness of the world building is enjoyable in its own

right. My experience as a reader was strengthened by the sense that there is more to find out about the world than we are told and that Abraham knows more than he has put on the page.

Chris Beckett's *Dark Eden* (Corvus, 2013), winner of the Arthur C. Clarke award for Best Novel in 2012, has a tighter focus. The novel is about a planet populated by the descendants of survivors from a crashed space ship. This story has more obvious links to our own world than in Abraham's novel, with names like Tommy and Angela and distorted references to such things as a

Rayed Yo for communication. But the geography of the planet is very different from ours. My trust that Beckett understands the science behind the luminous plants and the starry swirl of the sky does strengthen my belief in the novel as a whole. But for me, its real fascination lies in Beckett's speculations about how society might develop in such a situation and the impact this would have on individual lives. The narrative is in the first person, which gives us an immediate entry into the mind-set of the characters. For example, when John Redlantern describes David, an older man with a cleft palate, he says,

"... he looked at Met with his smile that wasn't really a smile, wind whistling in and out of his ugly hole of a face, with that other bit of mouth that went up where a nose should be and always seemed red and sore."

# SYSTEMS OF MAGIC

BY SANDRA UNERMAN

**Sandra Unerman** writes on Magic and the importance of rules in building a coherent and logical setting that readers and writers can both commit to.

In my view, it depends what kind of story you're writing. The invention of a detailed background which covers all the aspects of a world can be endlessly fascinating for the writer and for some kinds of fiction, can give a solidity and depth hard to achieve otherwise. But sometimes developing the background may stop the writer from ever getting on with the story itself and it may be better to work in a different way.

Some fantasy and SF is anthropological and then detailed world building is essential. The adventures in the foreground give the characters a reason to explore their world and much of the appeal for the reader lies in the depiction of imaginary places and societies.

In *The Dragon's Path* by Daniel Abraham (Orbit, 2012), we are given a world with rival religions, thirteen races

*...although the books draw on tropes familiar from Gothic literature... we are shown glimpses of fantastical visions, including a horse swimming high up on the castle roof and the Hall of Bright Carvings.*

These insights into the way the characters think and the stories they tell about their world are crucial to the novel's impact. As John and others explore further regions of the planet, their adventures engaged me because Beckett has built up such a convincing picture, not just of a strange place but of the way people might react to it.

Lois McMaster Bujold's demonstrates a different approach to world building, which she describes as 'just in time' (*Sidelines, Talks and Essays*, ebook 2015). The story develops out of the characters and their problems and the setting is worked out from there. *Shards of Honour* (Baen, 1986) concerns two characters from contrasting cultures and has scenes on three different planets as well as some dramatic scenes on space ships. There are interesting scientific novelties, like the uterine replicators which enable women to avoid the burdens of pregnancy but we are told just enough history and geography to provide an effective background to the action. This enables Bujold to focus more on the characters and their troubles and to bring them fully to life. I have never felt that Bujold's worlds are inadequately developed but I reread her novels for the characters, not the setting.

T.H. White's *Once and Future King* (Collins, 1958) provides another kind of story world. He sets the story of King Arthur in a version of the late Middle Ages in which the real kings of the period are legendary and Arthur as depicted by Sir Thomas Malory is real. But White does not attempt to evoke a consistent alternative history. Instead, he repeatedly draws attention to the unreality of his story. Jousting knights discuss their handicaps as though they were golfers and generally talk like the Edwardian gentlemen of White's childhood. Even more explicit are passages like this: 'You must remember that this was in the old Merry England... when the forests rang with knights walloping each other on the helm and the unicorns in the wintry moonlight stamped with their silver feet... But in the Old England there was a greater marvel still. The weather behaved itself.' (The Sword in the Stone, chapter XV.) White is not concerned with constructing a set of natural laws which would make all this plausible. Instead, he invites the reader into an idyllic storybook world, where nevertheless people struggle with universal human troubles.

Mervyn Peake's Gormenghast books are different again (*Titus Groan*, 1946, *Gormenghast*, 1950, *Titus Alone*, 1959, Eyre and Spottiswoode). The setting and characters are not familiar from legends, although the books draw on tropes familiar from Gothic literature, including the ruined castle and the melancholy aristocrat. We are shown glimpses of fantastical visions, including a horse swimming high up on the castle roof and the Hall of Bright Carvings. But more than that, both the setting and the characters share a heightened reality that engages us at a deep level. Peake uses vivid details and a slow build-up of tension to draw us in, as in this depiction of young Steerpik's climb onto the roof of Gormenghast castle from *Titus Groan*:



**Sandra Unerman** has written fantasy for many years and has an MA in Creative Writing from Middlesex University. Her recent publications include stories in *Midnight Circus*, Winter 2016 issue, and *Detectives of the Fantastic*, volume IV, from *Horrid Press*. She writes reviews for *Vector* and the *BFS*. She is a member of the Clockhouse London Writers and of an *Orbit* online workshop. Her other interests include folklore and history.

"He refused to allow himself to think of the sickening drop and glued his eyes upon the first of the grips. His left hand clasped the lintel as he felt out with his right foot and curled his toes around a rough corner of stone. Almost at once he began to sweat. His fingers crept up and found a cranny he had scrutinised at leisure. Biting his underlip until it bled freely over his chin, he moved his left knee up the surface of the wall. It took him perhaps seventeen minutes by the clock but by the time of his beating heart he was all evening upon the swaying wall. At moments he would make up his mind to have done with the whole thing, life and all, and to drop back into space, where his straining and sickness would end. At other moments, as he clung desperately, working his way upwards in a sick haze, he found himself repeating a line or two from some long-forgotten rhyme."

Steerpik is both appealing in his cleverness and his determination to escape from drudgery and monstrous in his ruthless scheming. The other characters are



similarly extreme and they live in a place of extremes. How the economy of Gormenghast has survived so long in a ruinous state, whether the setting is in the past or an alternative reality and so on are maybe questions Peake could have answered to if he had to. But even to ask the questions is to distract attention from the intense world of the books, which are more like living dreams than ordinary life. Asking practical questions about how this world works would spoil the impact.

A particular aspect of the advice about rules and world building concerns the use of magic in fantasy. Card, in *Writing Fantasy and SF*, (chapter 1), says that 'the magic has to be defined, at least in the author's

By contrast, in Margaret Irwin's time slip story, *Still She Wished for Company* (William Heinemann, 1924), the means by which characters move between the 18<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries are never fully explained. They struggle to understand what happens and specific attempts to work magic lead into unforeseen dangers. The apparitions have a quality like the hauntings of folk legends, from which the story derives a lot of its power.

Of course, a story is unlikely to be effective if the characters can escape from all their troubles just by using magic which costs them nothing. But a fantasy can sometimes tap into the reader's imagination all the more effectively when there is a sense that the rules

*...a story is unlikely to be effective if the characters can escape from all their troubles just by using magic which costs them nothing. But a fantasy can sometimes tap into the reader's imagination all the more effectively when there is a sense that the rules don't always apply...*

mind, as a whole new set of natural laws.' Similar advice is frequently given that magic must operate within limits and according to a logical system. Magic as a concept varies from writer to writer, drawing to a greater or lesser extent on traditional beliefs. But different kinds of magic in fiction aim for different effects.

At one extreme lies the parallel to Arthur C. Clarke's law that any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic: a system of magic which can be pinned down in sufficient detail is, from a reader's perspective, effectively a new science operating according to consistent and logical rules. In Randall Garrett's *Murder and Magic* (Ace Books, 1979) and his other Lord Darcy stories, the laws of magic have been codified and are used to solve murder mysteries. The fascination of these stories lies partly in the application of the invented rules and in a playful mixture of a medieval background with references from the world of Sherlock Holmes and other crime fiction. The world created is sufficiently convincing for Michael Kurland to have set a couple of novels there after Garrett's death. But this magic does not tap into the reader's longing for wonder or the deep roots of mythology.

don't always apply or the system can be disrupted. In Patricia McKillip's novels magic seems to be more a matter of inherent talent and the exploration of psychology than logic. Her characters learn to use their powers through trial and error and any system is liable to break down. In *The Bards of Bone Plain* (Ace Books, 2010), great powers of magic and learning do not prevent a wizard from making terrible mistakes and then having to deal with the consequences. In McKillip's books, the sense of wonder and the evocation of myth is much stronger than any interest in the rules by which the magic operates.

In my own writing, I have found that I need to start with the bones of the story I want to write and the characters, much more than the background world. But I would argue that for anyone, the right approach depends on the nature of the story. If the writer's aim is to build up a multi-faceted alternative reality, there will need to be a lot of background detail. If instead the focus is on the development of character or on the universal depths of the human psyche, as in a fairy tale, a few telling details and not too much explanation may be better.

If you've never read Elmore Leonard (1925 to 2013) you're in for a pleasant surprise. Leonard was a master craftsman of fiction, mainly writing westerns, suspense and crime fiction (very occasionally he strayed into borderline genre novels, such as *Touch* (1997).

# ELMORE LEONARD, CRAFTING THE SCENE

BY DEV AGARWAL

**Dev Agarwal** looks at how the late Elmore Leonard builds a scene through point of view, key details and dramatic tension.

Saul Bellow, Martin Amis and Stephen King were all aficionados of Leonard and he reached a wider audience with film adaptations of his work: *Get Shorty*, *Out of Sight*, and *Jackie Brown*. But the strength of Leonard as a story teller will always lie in the written word rather than adaptations of his work. Leonard is rightly celebrated for his dialogue, which is consistently vivid, often genuinely funny and pulls off the trick of transmitting the characters' emotions and thinking in an almost invisible fashion.

However, praising his command of dialogue almost does him a disservice as he was a master of all aspects of a novel. Common in the best of his novels is his lean prose and ability to get to the heart of each scene quickly. This is something he did in *Split Images* (1981) while also skillfully juggling multiple viewpoint characters.

The novel begins with an omniscient author describing a murder in Miami. It then moves to a police officer, Gary Hammond, observing the aftermath of the shooting. This is the first of a series of murders that propels the plot. The novel's primary protagonists are a reporter, Angela Nolan, and a detective, Bryan Hurd. In the middle of the book, Bryan, a Detroit cop, connects with local police officers while Angela is interviewing criminals, including one called Chichi. After Angela makes inquiries into Chichi's business, she meets Bryan for dinner. In this scene, they are eating in Chuck's Bar-B-Que Pit, recommended to them by the cop we already met, Gary Hammond.

While they eat, mostly alone in the restaurant, two men in cowboy hats come in.

Bryan "took a look at the two cowboys staring at them: giving them their tough-hombre movie-cowboy stares that wouldn't have been worth shit without the big hats. They were both in their twenties, shirts open, straggly hair coming out of their hats. Not powerfully built young men -- thank God -- but that dirty mean type Bryan had been sending to Jackson for the past sixteen years...They wore pass-the-time tattoos on their arms, the coarse designs of prison artists.

One of them said, "Hey, lady..." And Bryan thought, Here we go."

What might first strike us about this sequence is how economical Leonard is. He describes *just enough* physical detail of the antagonists to establish them in our minds. We know that they are young, unkempt and tattooed. They wear their shirts open, and of course, they both have prominent

cowboy hats. Their eye colour, the colour of their shirts, the design of their tattoos -- even the detail of the hats themselves aren't provided. We don't need those details. Our imagination is ignited by what Leonard does give us, and without realizing it, we're doing the work, filling in the details.

The narrative is presented through Bryan's point of view. It's easy to miss this point -- and it's crucial. Leonard doesn't just describe events as he observes them as the distanced writer. He assumes Bryan's values and perspective. So we experience the world of the story *through* him.

As the scene unfolds, Bryan's voice and experience manifests itself. This has already begun with the cowboys' initial introduction, in Bryan's dismissive attitude of their hats. The cowboys try to intimidate with what Bryan sarcastically describes as "tough-hombre" and "movie-cowboy stares." Bryan is also critical of their physicality -- "that dirty mean type Bryan had been sending to Jackson for the past sixteen years." The reader may not know that Jackson is a prison, but it can be deduced from the context. In which case we can keep moving and the confident writer won't pause for more exposition. I would suggest that finding the balance point in exposition (i.e. how much you reveal) is particularly important for the genre writer as we create many of our own reference points from scratch. Bryan's point of view reveals his perspective. He is older than the cowboys are, and more experienced. He knows this type of criminal -- and about getting into conflict -- "And Bryan thought, Here we go." Looking at that line, we can see that Leonard chose the first word -- "And"

-- with care. The cowboys speak and Bryan's interior thought is immediately triggered. What they have to say is less significant than Bryan's frustration at the predictability of the confrontation.

As mentioned earlier, the novel is told through multiple viewpoints. Leonard deploys a seamless transition in point of view. So far we've been looking at events through Bryan. The cowboys start talking, mocking Bryan, and the next lines continue the interior observation, but this time from Angela's viewpoint. With less experience of criminals and their threat she is more nervous. Then to her dismay, Bryan walks away from their table. She watches Bryan "cross to the hallway where a sign read *"Restrooms \* Telephone."*

The cowboys laugh at Bryan, asking ""You nervous? Gonna go take a piss?""

This dialogue is not only used to show that the threat is escalating, but also to direct the reader to a specific path. Leonard subtly manipulates us.

When Bryan returns, he interrupts the dialogue between the cowboys and Angela. They are pressuring and scaring her. But it's important that Bryan's return doesn't resolve anything. In this way, Leonard can continue to ratchet up the tension further -- and in a different direction as Bryan calls the cowboys "cocksuckers," and promises to "kick the shit" out of them.

The tension has now built so high that it demands a climax. In my view, this is the real artistry of what Leonard does. This is the easiest part of the story to fail at. If there's no build up in the scene's tension then there's no dramatic moment and no release in its climax. Mishandling these steps would make the entire scene fail. We might think of many moments in either films or novels where the writer has described a violent encounter but failed to build the right tension.

We are invested in Bryan and Angela and when they leave the restaurant, chased by the cowboys, we don't know what will happen next. Not only has Leonard introduced a threat -- the cowboys -- and built the tension around how Bryan and Angela will manage them, but he surprises us with the next revelation. On stepping outside, we're back in Angela's point of view, and the reader discovers an ally waiting outside:

"She would remember...going out the door into the soft evening light and seeing the gumball on top of the squad car turning without sound, Gary Hammond coming out of the car."

Gary Hammond is now in the scene. His appearance is a surprise, but importantly not implausible. Leonard has established him as a presence in both the novel -- it opens with him, and in this scene itself, as he recommended this restaurant to them.

The dialogue between Bryan and Gary is stripped away, partly for effect but also to keep the pace fast as

the drama builds. A common flaw in much genre fiction occurs where too much time is spent on dialogue during action scenes. That doesn't happen here:

"Bryan said to him, "You got a stick?"  
Gary said, "I got a flashlight."  
Bryan said, "Let me have it.""

The physical description is equally spare: "Gary...tossed the flashlight underhand, arching it flat, the chrome catching light. Bryan swiped it out of the air the way you catch a baton and turned to stand squarely before the entrance to Chuck's Bar-B-Que Pit."

This is writing that is not just seamless and spare, but elegant: how many authors would write, "Gary passed the flashlight to Bryan"? Instead, Gary "tossed" it, Bryan "swiped it out of the air" like a cheerleader -- a precise and evocative detail.

Bryan then faces the oncoming threat. He's described as not just waiting for it, but standing in a particular manner, "squarely," which evokes in the reader's mind a more precise image. We can imagine that someone getting ready for physical violence would set himself first.

Another choice Leonard makes is to keep Angela as the viewpoint character. Potentially any other character in the scene could narrate what happens -- including the cowboys. With novels that change points of view, there is always a decision to take in terms of who describes the story that we're experiencing. The obvious candidate is Bryan as the character about to have the violent encounter. However, a more interesting choice is to remain with Angela and to describe events from her perspective. She is not, in this scene, "along for the ride." Instead, she's alert, perhaps hyperalert with the adrenaline and fear.

Angela is "looking at the back of Bryan's Hawaiian shirt. She saw one of the double doors bang open and saw Bryan step in and sidearm the flashlight at the first one out, slamming it into him to send his big hat flying and the cowboy stumbling back, grabbing hold of his head. She saw Bryan swipe the other one across the face and saw the flashlight come apart, batteries spilling out. She saw the two cowboys as though they were dancing, the one trying to hold up the one with blood on his face."

A "rule" common to writing workshops is to remove unnecessary words from your prose. In this sequence that would ordinarily be "she saw." Leonard uses it multiple times and I can imagine many workshopers or editors striking that out each time. However, Leonard's usage creates a sense of Angela as bystander, seeing the action sweep them all up, and also Leonard manages to hide the word and make it unobtrusive. He is careful with point of view, while at the same time, not overwhelming us with Angela's perspective. This is achieved again by the careful choice of the details that he reveals through her in the scene. Leonard reminds

us that Bryan wears a particular shirt, that the attackers aren't just two men but cowboys with large hats. The physical attack engages more than just visual sensation -- the door "bangs" open, reflecting the force of their forward movement. The attackers don't have names, and Leonard is unconcerned about that, confidently guiding the reader through what's happening even though he uses "the one" twice in a sentence.

The fight is quite simple. All that happens is that both men are struck in the head. But this scene is described through a particular voice and with carefully selected word choices until a precise vision emerges. One antagonist loses his hat, the other is "swiped" -- echoing the earlier use of the word -- Angela watches them fall backwards, "as though they were dancing," with one man trying to hold the other one upright.

Leonard might have given Bryan a nightstick -- which is the weapon that he asked Gary for. But Gary didn't have nightstick, he had a flashlight. We might ask why they had that exchange and why Leonard deliberately chose a flashlight. Physically, a nightstick is black, and doesn't have a chrome top, so how would that look when it's thrown? (It would not flash in late afternoon sunlight). It's made of wood and is unlikely to break. But a flashlight could burst open and spill its batteries, adding more details. These particular choices gives us a sense of immediate action when Bryan hits both men. The weapon he uses literally disintegrates for a more dramatic moment.

Leonard is particularly useful for genre readers as he shows us how a scene can be layered with details that become significant later on -- a useful technique for anyone trying to show their reader how the future or a fantasy setting is different from our world but still graspable.

I mentioned earlier that Leonard manipulated his reader? We watched Bryan walk away from the cowboys at one point, apparently going to the toilet -- "Gonna take a piss?" But what Leonard was actually doing, was having his character walk away from the scene for a moment. We even saw where Bryan was walking to, a sign saying "Restrooms \* Telephones." He just wasn't going to the restroom. The word *telephones* was right there, on the page, before us all along. And if that wasn't enough, one of the cowboys mocked Bryan, with: "Gonna go take a piss?"

Once the violent encounter is over, Leonard gives us the exposition to explain the scene's mechanics: Angela asks: "You called Gary?" and Bryan replies that "I had him radioed -- talking fast."

Leonard set up Gary Hammond's necessary arrival beforehand and slipped it past us.

Bryan then goes on to say to Angela, "Did you learn anything?"

She says something that characters rarely comment on, "I'm shaking." This is both a physical and emotional response to violence. How few books actually pause to reflect on the characters' emotional reaction in this way?

Bryan asks the same question again because he's making a point.

This time Angela replies flippantly, "For a quiet evening, go out with cops."

And Leonard hits us with another dramatic turn,

"I didn't bring them. When you ask questions about people in that business they want to know who you are, look you over."

That brought her eyes open wide. "Those two work for Chichi?"

"Or somebody close to him," Bryan said. He started the car. "If it was me I'd fire them, get somebody can do the job."

Again, we can think of other stories where the writer felt he or she should add violence to build drama, but it's not necessarily centred within the overall story. The point of this scene is both to add drama through violence but also to reveal to Angela the risks of her investigation. This leads directly into the finale of the novel itself.

And Leonard is still not finished. He keeps the scene working. He's shown us Angela's emotions, he's shown us the comedy of the situation ("For a quiet evening, go out with cops") he's misdirected us, then he shows us Bryan's competence as a fighter.

The chapter ends with Angela's point of view once more as she reflects to Bryan, "Does everybody have another person inside them?" They are emotionally connected and Angela reflects on whether she wholly understands who he is.

Bryan then talks about the encounter:

"Hitting the Miami cowboys seemed what? Vicious, unnecessary."  
She remained silent.

Many narrative strands combine in this sequence -- always a good thing to do when telling your story. Revisiting Leonard for *Focus*, I was reminded how spare and to the point his writing is. When Leonard was on form (and he was on form for decades) his writing was *always* to this standard. If we're going to learn from someone, Leonard is in his own league. His writing is no chore to read and is a masterclass in structure, plot and building drama.

**"Fictional characters whose interior lives don't hum and gurgle with this or that emotional tone can't be expected to complete with the genuine and complex human beings against whom - at a certain level - they are constantly being measured."**

- A. L. Kennedy

Ultimately, as writers, we want our readers to care about our imaginary worlds – and the best way to get them to do it is through the people who inhabit that world.

*The Blood Jewels* was grim and dark before Grim Dark became a sub-genre. Whereas a lot of contemporary Grim Dark tends to display its grimness through grit (Joe Abercrombie's *First Law* trilogy being a classic example), Bishop's worlds and words are lyrical, evocative and perhaps all the more cruel because of the poetry of the language.

Bishop takes the concept of Hell, turns it on its head, as she does with most things we take for granted. What if dark meant good and strong, and light was weak? What if women ruled and men served? The result of these answers is a society that both reflects our own and differs from it. Although there is magic, a dragon and unicorns, there is also a very human story. A story that revolves around three powerful, charismatic, yet vulnerable men: Saetan, Daemon and Lucivar. Father and two sons. And they revolve around Jaenell, the Queen and Witch they all want to serve.

It is a story of people called the Blood – the race gifted with powers from the dragons.

"As she [the Dragon Queen] flew through the Realms, her scales sprinkled down, and whatever creature her scales touched, whether it walked on two legs or four or danced in the air on the wings, whatever creature a scale touched became blood of her blood – still part of the race it came from, but also Other, remade to become caretaker and ruler." (P.698)

The very fact that all Blood do not belong to the same race, but are set apart from others of their kind by their power creates racial tensions, power struggles and a society that is continuously balancing on a knife's edge. Bishop employs the 'otherness' of these characters, to draw emotional response from the reader, by showcasing it through different themes that run throughout the series.

Nothing is wasted. Every word, every phrase, every chapter serves a purpose. Different POVs are utilised to make the story and the world richer. Bishop uses multiple points-of-views deftly, leading us into the heart of the story. She writes about characters we identify with and takes us deep into the POV. Then she writes about characters we dislike and we come to identify/sympathise with them too.

The Trilogy opens with a prologue in which we learn that, "Daemon and Lucivar are drawn to one another without understanding why, so wound into each other's

# CHARACTERS WHO FEEL

BY DOLLY GARLAND

**Dolly Garland** makes her debut in *Focus* and writes about the importance of emotionally connecting with our characters. Fantasy writers face particular challenges in finding the emotional centre when they surround their characters with the necessary 'furniture' of genre tropes.

We read fantasy for its fantastical elements, to experience the magic – both literal (through spells and supernatural powers), and metaphorical (the act of being exported to worlds the reader can't reach in real life). However, as crucial as these elements are, the stories that stay with us, that connect with us on the most fundamental level, are the stories that come from harnessing our emotion to the characters'.

Hogwarts would be just an entertaining setting if we didn't care whether or not Harry survived his tenure there, and if we didn't react to Dobby's death as if we knew him as a friend. Middle Earth wouldn't have become timeless if the hobbits, Gandalf, the elves and the orcs had not connected to us in a direct and visceral way.

Anne Bishop in her *Blood Jewels Trilogy* pulls off the difficult writerly trick of taking the reader on a series of emotional journeys through her characters over a span of centuries. The original trilogy includes: *Daughter of the Blood*, *Heir to the Shadows*, and *Queen of the Darkness*. Each time I come back to it, I'm always impressed – both as a reader and a writer – at how Bishop explores a range of difficult themes (ranging from mental health and menstrual cycles to rape and child abuse) through her characters without ever preaching. What she achieves is characters who feel strongly, and what they feel, we – the readers – feel.

lives they cannot separate. Uneasy friends, they have fought legendary battles, have destroyed so many courts that Blood are afraid to have them together for any length of time." (p.4) Then they discover they are brothers, and that the Witch, "The living myth," for which they have both endured centuries of pain and torture, is coming at last.

As members of a long-lived race, Daemon and Lucivar will spend centuries more, waiting until she arrives. For centuries, they serve the queens they have been ordered to serve, controlled by a Ring of Obedience on their penises. Bishop uses her protagonists' and antagonists' responses to this slavery to establish their characters. Sex is used as a weapon. But here, too, Bishop's role reversal challenges our conventional perceptions. As readers, we are familiar with sexual violence being perpetrated against girls and women (this has come to the fore in our genre in particular with the debate around the text and HBO versions of G. R. R. Martin's *Game of Thrones*) but Bishop also explores what happens when the victims are boys or men.

Daemon who has been used as a pleasure slave all his life, says to Lucivar, "They've raped everything I am until there's nothing left to offer" (P.100) to Jaenell, to the Queen he wants to serve, to the Witch he fervently believes he was born to love. For all his caring, his love, and the new ties he has developed because of Jaenell, Daemon – like any Blood Warlord Prince – is not supposed to be tame. During his first battle in Kaeleer, fighting this time for a Queen he willingly served, "Smiling a cold, cruel smile, Daemon slipped his hands into his trouser pockets and glided between clumps of fighters – invisible, undetectable – and left devastation in his wake." (P.1064) Take that passage, place it in most stories, and this would be a description of a villain. In this story, this is one of the main protagonists, whom we care about. And therein lies Bishop's skill for creating characters whose emotions draw the reader in. She achieves this by showing us Daemon's immense powers, but also his immense vulnerabilities and the scars on his soul. Bishop's achievement is to take a character who she describes as "cruel" (accurately), and still move us to identify with him, and even root for him. She *earns* this empathy for Daemon by offering the reader bite-sized pieces of Daemon's personality – dark, light, and shades in-between.

As mentioned earlier, Bishop does this by taking us into the antagonists' POV as well. Dorothea, one of the primary antagonists, experiences the irritation of sexual discrimination when everyone "wanted to believe that a male had made her cruel, a male had manipulated her and controlled her thoughts, a male had been behind her rise to power and the viciousness." (P.815) Despite the fact that for the most part, we despise Dorothea's actions, we can still see her struggle as a woman.

Bishop also plays with the boundaries of mental health. She does this by exploring the concept of what it means to be broken, and degrees of it. How others respond to it – different ways in which they do, and what it says about the respondents' characters. What



**Dolly Garland** writes fantasy that is bit like her - muddled in cultures. Having lived in three countries, and several cities, she now calls London her home, though the roots of her fantasy have returned to India, where she grew up. You can chat to her @DollyGarland on Twitter, or @DollyGarlandAuthor on Facebook, and at [www.dollygarland.com](http://www.dollygarland.com). She is also the founder of Kaizen Journaling ([www.kaizenjournaling.com](http://www.kaizenjournaling.com)) where she teaches people how to use journaling for personal and professional development.

she teaches us, as writers, is that you can explore and talk about important social issues, create character depth, and thus draw emotional response from the readers, without needing to preach or info-dump.

Jaenell was thought to be mentally ill by her family because she was strange, tying into the theme of 'otherness.' At Winsol, when everyone is sharing a drink, Jaenell says to Daemon that it is fitting that she drinks alone, "After all, I am kindred but not kind." As a result of being treated thus due to her 'strangeness', Jaenell experiences fractured realities – where on the one hand, some of the strongest voices in the realm are yearning for her, The Witch, but on the other hand her own family disbelieves Jaenell's truths. This results in Jaenell doubting herself – this self-doubt in turn affects the men (and their character development) who love her: Saetan, Daemon, and Lucivar. Bishop uses Jaenell as the centre of the web, and anything that happens to her, has the strongest impact on the three males closest to her, but also impacts secondary characters and the antagonists. Every action has a reaction. Every scene has

a sequel. Characters' emotions are the core of Bishop's story, driving the plot forward.

Bishop depicts another type of mental health issue through her creation of the Twisted Kingdom. Jaenell, aged twelve, is raped in a hospital for mentally ill children. Saetan links his mind with Daemon's, to use both of their powers, in order to save Jaenell. She is barely saved, but scarred from the rape, she keeps her consciousness in the abyss – not allowing it to return to her body, and thus the physical world. Daemon, who was already in the mentally fragile state, unable to remember everything that happened the night he tried to save Jaenell, believes the lie he's been told – that he was the one who raped and murdered Jaenell. Because this comes from the one man he loves, his brother, "He [Daemon] screamed again and tumbled into the shattered inner landscape landens called madness and the Blood called the Twisted Kingdom." (P. 417) As Bishop takes us through the respective mental breakdowns – of different kinds, and portrayed differently - of these two protagonists, we are going on an emotional journey that attaches us further to the characters.

As writers, there is a lot we can learn from Bishop about how to create compelling, well-rounded characters that feel, and thus make the readers feel. Yes, you need a plot, and conflict. A richly crafted world doesn't hurt either. But all of that should be a backdrop – not unimportant, but a backdrop to the people who live in that world. Bishop shows us how to make everything in the world of our creation trigger characters' responses – visceral and emotional. The reader bonds with that world, to that story, to that time and place – because they are responding to the characters' responses, or feeling it alongside them. All themes and issues, may it be sex and mental health such as Bishop uses (which essentially enhances plot and conflict) or anything else, serve the same purpose. They depict journeys of the main characters, and through the characters' emotional responses, draw emotional responses from the reader. And once you get that emotional response, you've got the reader hooked into your world – a significant achievement and a goal for any writer.

Bishop, Anne, *The Black Jewells Trilogy*, Omnibus Edition, Roc (New American Library), 2003

## Recommendations...

**Nick Austin** is steeped in British SF, working as a blurb-writer for Panther books, then commissioning-editor for Sphere, Corgi, Granada, Penguin and Hodder/New English Library. If you've ever read an SF paperback in the UK from the 1970s onwards, the chances are you've read one that Nick worked on.

His recommendations are:

1. *Radix* by AA Attanasio (1981) has a good claim to be considered the ultimate science-fiction novel. A truly outstanding epic of transcendence, mutation and violent adventure in a brilliantly evoked future Earth. Shortlisted for the Nebula Award on first publication. Current English-language edition published by Phoenix Pick, with internal illustrations by James O'Barr.
2. *Blood Meridian (or the Evening Redness in the West)* by Cormac McCarthy (1985): this brilliant ultra-violent novel by the author of *The Road* was inspired by the scalp-hunting exploits of the notorious Glanton Gang in the mid-nineteenth-century American South-West. Technically a historical novel, in its mesmerising power to depict a nightmare world devoid of almost every civilised value it has genuinely timeless resonances guaranteed to appeal strongly to every intelligent reader, whatever his or her usual genre preferences. Current UK edition published by Picador.
3. *Seconds*, a film directed by John Frankenheimer (1966): based on the 1963 novel of the same title by David Ely. The third self-contained movie in Frankenheimer's informal "paranoia trilogy" (the other two being *Seven Days in May* and *The Manchurian Candidate*). An engrossing, relentlessly bleak and disturbing story of the impossibility of having your time over again. Stars Rock Hudson in his best screen role. Dual-format DVD/Blu-Ray published by Masters of Cinema.
4. *10th Symphony* by Dmitry Shostakovich: the composer said this classic belting symphonic number was intended "to depict a society being overtaken by violent events" (or something like that). As such it should have an appeal to SF folk, particularly the short second movement in which snare drums do a great job of evoking the sound of machine-gun fire.

# Re/Source...

A page for resources and updates for working writers...

**"Proving ground" can be defined as a term for a reservation where technology and tactics are experimented with or are tested. The BSFA runs its own proving grounds, through its regular groups for writers. These are the Orbiter groups and are open to people at any stage of their publishing career (from beginners to established novelists).**

**Terry Jackman** provides us with her regular update from Orbiter's cutting edge:

## Orbiter News

Orbits are online critiquing groups. They are available free to any BSFA member.

The only other entry requirements is a commitment to provide feedback to other group members in return for comments.

New members join established groups, until such time as group size dictates 'skimming' to form a new one, by which time you should find that you are comfortable with the system. At the present time the BSFA runs seven groups of 4-7 writers. Each group has a group leader to remind members when submissions are due. Most groups workshop a manuscript every two months. Newly joined members will, of course, not be expected to take on the role of leading the group to begin with.

Each Orbit focuses on both short fiction and novels, and members can choose to specialise in only one form, as they prefer. To join, please contact me at [terry@terryjackman.co.uk](mailto:terry@terryjackman.co.uk)

## Orbiter Successes

Frances Gow's second novel 'The King of Carentan', is now out from Double Dragon Publications [co-written with her father].

In shorter length:

Dom Dulley: short story, 'Saturday Night Genocide' in *Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine*

Sam Fleming: short story 'The Prime Importance of a Happy Number' in *Clockwork Phoenix* vol 5

— and 'She Gave Her Heart, He Took Her Marrow', originally published in *Best of Apex*, has now been included in the *Campbell Award Anthology*.

Terry Jackman: short story, 'Incense Shrine' in the anthology *Myriad Lands* from Guardbridge Books. — also engaged by Guardbridge Books to edit several of the other stories.

Patrick Mahon: short story, 'Cut the Blue Wire' in *Every Day Fiction*.

Maureen Neal: short story, 'The Unbinding' in the anthology *Dystopian Express*, from Hydra Publications.

Geoff Nelder: short stories, 'Song of the Multitude', Editor's pick in *Horrorzine*  
'Eidolon Redoubt' in *Twisted Tales*  
'Blue Ice' in the anthology *Rave Soup*  
'Memory Rack' in *Wifiles*  
'Prime Meridian' in *Twisted Tales*  
'Tumbler's Gift' in *Perihelion*  
And a non-fiction article, 'Cycling Offa's Dyke' in *Seven Day Cyclist*.

Sue Oke: short story, 'Hide and Hunt' in the anthology *Existence is Elsewhere* from Elsewhen Press. (Sue is now also the *Vector's* Reviews Editor).

Jacqui Rogers: short stories, 'Evidence of Life' in *SFerics 2017*  
'Calypso Solo' in the *Quickfic* anthology from Digital Fiction Publications, and two flash fiction pieces, 'Grand Bazaar' and 'Red Riding Hood' in the anthology *In a Flash*, from Sinister Saints.

Sandra Unerman: short story, 'The Night Hound' in *Detectives of the Fantastic IV* from Horrified Press.

PLUS

Mjke Wood: short story, 'Shackles of Memory' in *The Singularity*, ed 3.

Frances Gow: YA novel, *The Prince of Carentan* by Frances Gow and DC Laval, from Double Dragon Publishing



Re/Source... Re/Source... Re/Source... Re/Source... Re/Source... Re/Source...

Geoff Nelder: short, 'Voyage of the Silents', published by *Pennyshorts*

Terry Martin: short story, 'Bag' in *Sci Phi Journal*

Sandra Unerman: short story, 'Thorn Candle Castle', in *Sword and Sorcery* online magazine.

Sandra's article for us, "High Stilts," appears this issue. Also, Sandra provides her reflections on participating in an Orbiter group:

### Middle Oak Writing Group by Sandra Unerman

As well as being an Orbiter, I am a member of a writing group which meets face to face. This began among fellow students on the Middlesex MA course in Creative Writing in 2010/12, which had a specialist strand in genre fiction. We wanted to continue sharing our work with one another and have kept going ever since.

We circulate selections of writing by email beforehand and provide critiques at the monthly meetings. Because we are a small group, the discussions can be fairly informal, although we stick broadly to the Milford rules: each participant comments in turn for no more than four minutes, giving feedback which is honest but as constructive as possible, and the writer does not speak until the end of a round, except to answer direct questions.

One advantage of face to face sessions is that reactions are more immediate and discussion can range more widely, especially when different people take different views. The meetings also provide a good forum for exchanging news and seeking opinions on writing topics in a more flexible way than online.

We now have members not connected to the MA course and we have room for a few more. We meet on a Tuesday evening, in a private house. If anyone is interested and lives within reach of East Barnet, you are welcome to contact me at [sandraunerman379@btinternet.com](mailto:sandraunerman379@btinternet.com).

### Online Writers' Workshop

Since 2000, the **Online Writing Workshop for Science Fiction, Fantasy and Horror** has provided a place for writers to improve their writing and help their fellow writers to improve.

*"I think an active membership in OWW is one of the very best investments a genre writer can make in his or her future."*

— Colleen Lindsay, literary agent

*"I'm not exaggerating when I say [my membership in the OWW] changed my life — I doubt I'd have a career now if I hadn't joined the workshop."*

— Ian Tregillis, Tor Books author

The OWW's peer review structure enables writers to collect feedback from writers of all backgrounds and levels of accomplishment. We're proud to name dozens of published authors as alumni or current members, including Ilona Andrews, Jodi Meadows, Ian Tregillis, Elizabeth Bear, Charles Coleman Finlay, Jaime Lee Moyer, and N.K. Jemison, among many others.

Each month, our editors choose four submissions to provide professional feedback on the workshop's most promising work. This popular feature provides valuable input not only for the writers whose work is being reviewed, but also for other members who can see how professionals approach an already-good story and improve it. The peer review mechanisms built into the workshop provide most of the workshop's value, however. Getting feedback from like-minded writers helps to improve a specific piece, but analyzing others' work to give feedback helps authors learn lessons that will inform their own writing for the rest of their writing careers.

We're proud of the community that we've built at the *Online Writing Workshop*, and we welcome you to join us for a free one-month trial with no commitment beyond the trial. After your trial period, you can opt to join for \$6 per month, \$30 for six months, or \$49 for a one-year membership.

Want to know more?

Visit us at <http://sff.onlinewritingworkshop.com>

## Milford SF Writers' Conference and Bursaries for SF Writers of Colour

Established in the UK by James Blish in 1972, Milford has always been a gathering of peers in the SF/F world. Many famous names have passed through from Anne McCaffrey, George R.R. Martin, and Samuel Delaney to Alastair Reynolds, Neil Gaiman, and Charles Stross. Held annually, it now takes place in rural North Wales in mid-September.

With a maximum of fifteen published writers kettled together for a whole week the pressure is intense but the rewards many. Essentially it's a week in which published writers submit short stories or novel chunks to a maximum of 15,000 words in one or two pieces. There's a formal element of scheduled critique (each afternoon). Mornings are free (to read, write, catch up on crits or explore Snowdonia). Evenings are social time. We have the run of Trigonos, an ethically run community business which provides accommodation, meeting rooms, and home cooked food. (You will never starve at Trigonos.) Set in its own grounds looking up the valley to Snowdon, it even has its own lake, though you sacrifice mobile phone signal for the rural beauty.

Critiques are professional level, strict but fair. Everyone is encouraged to deliver their thoughts sensitively while digging deep to knock the kinks out of the story under scrutiny and to offer ideas for improvement. The *Milford Method* of critiquing is not only well established, but many other writers' groups have adopted it.

The group meets in a comfortable room with chairs drawn up in a circle. Each participant, in rotation, spends up to four minutes (timed) giving their critique of the work at hand. Constructive rather than destructive criticism is strongly encouraged. No interruption, whether by the author or anyone else, is allowed during this stage of the proceedings. After everyone has spoken the author gets an uninterrupted right of reply. This is followed by a more general discussion of the piece.

Writers being writers, post-crit discussions often happen after dinner or through coffee-and-cake breaks. (Did I mention there was cake?) It's not unusual to plot-noodle or to work out the details of how to prevent a zombie plague over breakfast.

Milford is getting so popular that it books up pretty quickly. We do, however, like to encourage new faces, so each year five places out of fifteen are ring-fenced for writers who've never attended a Milford before. The only qualification is that a writer must have sold at least one piece of fiction to a recognised SF market. That can be anything from a short story to a full-length novel.

An exciting new development is happening in 2017. The *8Squared Eastercon*, held a few years ago in Bradford, kindly donated the cost of a place at Milford to be used to enable a science fiction or fantasy writer of colour to attend. This kind offer was immediately matched by a writer attending Milford who wishes to remain anonymous. So in 2017 we have two bursaries available to pay for two writers of colour to attend the conference. The bursary (value £610) covers all conference and accommodation costs for the week at Trigonos, but doesn't include the cost of transport to and from the event.

Details of how to apply for the bursaries are on the Milford website (see below). Application is by letter to a maximum of 2,000 words, posted or emailed along with an application form (downloadable from the website). Applicants should tell us why they want or need this bursary. They should tell us about their writing, about themselves, their experience, their ambitions.

Applications are open from 1<sup>st</sup> October 2016 to 28<sup>th</sup> February 2017. Up to two successful applicants will be notified by the end of March, and must accept or refuse within one week of receiving the offer. If potential applicants have any questions before making an application please email [for@guidance](mailto:for@guidance).

The bursary opportunity is intended to be an encouragement and not a quota. We only have two bursaries available, and only for 2017, however we operate an equal opportunities policy so all SF/F writers who are 'Milford qualified' are welcome to apply for the full-price Milford SF Writers' Conference places in any year, subject to availability.

Milford 2016, held from 10<sup>th</sup> - 17<sup>th</sup> September, is now fully booked, though you can go on our waiting list in case there are cancellations. Bookings are already coming in for 2017, so don't delay. Milford 2017 is 9<sup>th</sup> - 16<sup>th</sup> September and bookings are open now. There are, at the time of writing, still places left, including some of the ringfenced ones. We have the dates for 2018 (15<sup>th</sup> - 22<sup>nd</sup> September) but booking won't open until 16<sup>th</sup> September 2016. Writers who have attended twice in a row are encouraged to take a year off in the third year to give others a chance.

You can find out more about Milford, about the bursaries, about Trigonos and about writers who have passed through Milford in the last forty-plus years on our website: [www.milfordSF.co.uk](http://www.milfordSF.co.uk). Anyone who needs additional information about Milford or the bursaries can contact me, Jacey Bedford, Milford secretary, at [<jacey@jaceybedford.co.uk>](mailto:jacey@jaceybedford.co.uk)

So why does a science fiction magazine like *Focus* carry poetry? Am I carrying out some lone\*, lost-cause crusade or does poetry have some deeper relevance? (\*Not totally alone, as Ian Hunter is fighting in the same corner over at the *British Fantasy Society*).

I did a quick vox-pop survey of some of my writing contacts and the reasons they gave for writing poetry as well as prose included...

"From the time I was a kid, I wanted to write novels AND poems. I never saw them as competing interests."

... Beth Cato.

"It's how I avoid writer's block, switching gears... Using different writing 'muscles' really helps to keep ideas percolating. Sometimes, writing in one type kicks up an idea that works well in the other form."

... Ash Krafton.

"The distinction between the two is to some extent arbitrary. Many of my poems involve storytelling; my fiction often incorporates poetic language."

... Bruce Boston.

"I like the challenge of writing in different forms. I read pretty much everything so it seems natural to me to write in different forms as well."

... Charles Gramlich.

"Poetry might be considered literary daydreaming. We wordsmiths tend to stick words together creatively in an ever expanding desire to capture both imagery and feeling by connecting the written language.

Poetry is like song lyrics, a disjointed ramble may often evoke a mood or memory or idea randomly. Poetry is also often the core membrane, the inner workings of the writer's brain."

... K Von DeWitt.

"I write short stories and plays, but poetry has a sense of containment, of distillation that I don't get with any other medium. It feels aesthetic inside and outside of the words – it's a sculpture, a thought experiment I love to chip away at, to contour and to find a new gem of meaning. It feels like a form of meditation to me sometimes."

... Susan Grey.

Or, to put it another way, writing poetry is far more than an aesthetic exercise, it has a purpose. It is not that it's odd some SF&F authors write poetry but weird more don't do so!

My own personal view is writers are like artists. Just as you rarely find a painter who only works in one medium, say oils, to the exclusion of everything else

# SO... WHY POETRY IN *FOCUS* – AND HOW TO GET STARTED WRITING IT

BY CHARLES CHRISTIAN

**Charles Christian** is another longstanding contributor to *Focus* (his work compiling our poetry slot appears later in this issue). This issue he's discussing how to write for genre poetry markets.

Despite the fact poetry has been woefully ignored at most conventions in the UK in recent years, this is not the situation in the US where science fiction poetry (and science fact, as well as related 'speculative fiction' genre poetry: fantasy, horror, magical realism etc) is a far more mainstream phenomenon. More to the point, all these genre have a very long tradition of SF&F authors, both novelists and short story writers, who also write poetry.

The tradition stretches back to Edgar Allan Poe (*Quoth the Raven "Nevermore"*) – in fact nearly 200 years later, Poe's poetry style is still a very strong influence on modern poets of the Dark Fantasy/Gothick/Steampunk persuasion. A century later we had H.P. Lovecraft as an active poet and short story writer, while coming closer to home we have Joe (*The Forever War*) Haldeman winning awards for his poetry, while other active poetry writers include Clive Barker, the late Iain Banks, Ken MacLeod, and Neil Gaiman.

It was Banks who said "I'm going to see if I can get a book of poetry published before I kick the bucket," while Neil Gaiman commented (when I asked him about this, while preparing this article) "I do not even know why all novelists do not write poetry!"

and never occasionally works in others, such as acrylics, watercolours and charcoals. So with writers, there is no reason why a novelist shouldn't also write short stories, non-fiction, journalism, graphic novels/comics, film scripts, and even poetry. Neil Gaiman, for example, is active in all forms.

OK, so you are interested in poetry -- but where do you start? Here are ten suggestions to be going on with although there are more, in fact you can spend your entire life learning studying the subject...

### **(1) Read Poetry**

There's a widespread complaint in the poetry world that there are more people writing poetry than reading it (which is not all that far fetched) however it is vital to read so you have a handle on the styles people are now writing in. In the same way many of the 'pulp era' science fiction stories of the 1920s and 1930s now seem desperately dated, particularly in their attitudes towards women and race, so it is not uncommon today to encounter would-be poets still writing in a style that went out of fashion in the early years of the last century.

### **(2) Go See Poetry Performances**

There is a caveat here that if you attend local poetry clubs with open mic sessions, you will frequently encounter some very poor poetry being poorly read. Keep a look out for Roger McGough, John Hegley and Ian McMillan. All three write good poetry (though please note it is not genre poetry) that is accessible to the newbie, and they will deliver a truly entertaining performance.

### **(3) Don't Get Hung Up On The Technical Stuff**

Forget everything you were taught at school about iambic pentameters and similar aspects of poetic technique. The world has moved on since *Palgrave's Golden Treasury*, which really was a compendium of poems by long dead white men (and a handful of women). Yes, of course you can still write traditional-style verse poetry with its rhythms, meters and rhyme schemes (many people still do) but there is also free verse and prose poetry – both more open forms of poetry that follow the rhythm of natural speech. (So you no longer need worry about which words rhyme with "orange" \*) In fact the latter, prose poetry, can frequently crossover with micro and flash fiction - which is another reason why fiction writers should explore the form.

### **(4) Experiment With Minimalist Forms**

Start modestly with short poems rather than hurl yourself into sonnets and longer or more complex poetry forms. The Japanese haiku (although within the SF&F genre you are more likely to encounter scifaiku or just plain 'ku) is a good way to start easing yourself into



Charles Christian's latest non-fiction book is *A Travel Guide to Yorkshire's Weird Wolds: The Mysterious Wold Newton Triangle* - in it you'll find legends of werewolves, zombies, headless ghosts, screaming skulls, Lawrence of Arabia, buried fairy gold, and even a "parkin"-eating dragon. You can also find the connection between a real-life meteorite, Philip Jose Farmer and some of fiction's greatest heroes.

'Weird Wolds' is available only on Amazon Kindle.

poetry. Broadly speaking (though this is another rule that can be ignored) a haiku is a 17 syllable micro poem written in a 5-7-5 format. We regularly publish scifaiku in *Focus* if you need to look for examples.

### **(5) Understand The Difference Between Poetry And Prose**

A novel can be compared to a river: it starts in the mountains and makes its way down to the sea, with the author guiding you along its course. It has a beginning, a middle and an end, plus a plot, sub-plots and multiple characters. By contrast a poem is more akin to you standing by that river at one particular place, at one moment in time watching the water flow by and reflecting upon what it means to you. Your thoughts, for example, as you watch a dead tree trunk being swept past you, on the brevity and transitory nature of life. No plot, no characters, just observation and reflection.

### **(6) Don't Explain -- Make The Reader Think**

One of the more frequent failings of novice poets is the feeling they need to explain their work by providing

an introduction and a nice neat conclusion. No, you don't need to do this poetry, you are sharing your thoughts and emotions with your readers and you leave it to them to draw their own conclusions and reflect on their own feelings. For this reason, one of the more common pieces of advice to novice poets is to cut the first and last stanzas/verses of their poems.

For example, one of the more influential poems of the 20th century (whole academic careers and PhD theses have been based upon its interpretation) is *XXII* a minimalist poem published in 1923 by William Carlos Williams

so much depends  
upon

a red wheel  
barrow

glazed with rain  
water

beside the white  
chickens.

Williams does not explain why so much depends on the wheelbarrow, nor why it is sitting in the rain if it is so important, or what the chickens have got to do with. (He doesn't even give it a proper title.) But this doesn't matter, it is the resultant imagery that is important.

### (7) Make The Language Leap Off The Page

One of the biggest distinctions between prose and poetry is the use of language. With poetry you are writing an imaginative expression of your thoughts and experiences in language chosen and arranged to create a specific emotional response through meaning, sound and rhythm. Which is a rather long winded way of saying you do not use mundane language in poetry, instead you choose your words carefully, possibly using imagery or metaphor, to create something memorable. To go back to the Williams example, notice how he describes the wheelbarrow as being "glazed" with rainwater, rather than soaked or wet. This also brings us back to the craft of writing as a whole. If you are writing

a novel about the mysteries of deep space travel then you need to have the language that can adequately convey its scale and emptiness, rather than resort to trite or clichéd descriptions. Poetry is a way of honing these skills

### (8) No Purple Prose

Don't be twee and mimsy. The corollary of the importance of language is not to go over the top and think you have to your special 'poetic' words in your poetry. Using words such as *harken*, and *betwix*, 'twas and *shards* does not make your verse better. Similarly avoid any anachronistic style of sentence construction unless you are being ironic, you are not Yoda

### (9) Never Leave Home Without A Pen And Notebook

Almost all writers do this as a matter of course but with poetry it can be even more satisfying as, sitting in a coffee shop somewhere killing time, you may be able to draft and even complete a new poem.

### (10) Be Critical And Honest About Your Writing

Once again this applies to all writers but whereas with a novel or a longer short story the very process of writing means you cannot help but review, revise and edit your work over the days, weeks and months, with a poem you may have the work completed within a matter of hours. Best advice is finish it and put it away - then come back to review it the next day, when the rush of enthusiasm has passed and you can be look at your work afresh and be more objective about its merits.

So try it – and if you want to, send me your work if you'd like me to critique it.

(\* Incidentally *orange* does rhyme with *Blorenge* (a mountain in Wales) and *sporange* (a sac where spores are made).

\* **Charles Christian** is a committee member of the Society of Authors recently formed *Poetry & Spoken Word Group*, and he is the editor of Science Fiction Poetry Association's *Rhyslins Awards* 2016 poetry anthology.

*...you do not use mundane language in poetry, instead you choose your words carefully, possibly using imagery or metaphor, to create something memorable.*

# POEMS FROM THE STARS

*BSFA Poetry Submissions edited by Charles Christian*

## All the Way Down

The Trojan Mouse  
makes her descent  
taking her crew  
of symbiotes  
all the way down  
to the bottom  
of Sky City  
where full pantries  
& rich larders,  
she promises,  
just sit & wait  
without defense  
for their conquest.

... Herb Kauderer (US)

## Pills

let's take the pills together,  
my love – now we can read  
each other's thoughts

you think I'm fat?  
hate the cat's name?  
liked you better before

... Lauren McBride (US)

## Spring Dawn

spring dawn  
halfway up the mountain  
through binoculars we look back  
the world below awakening  
to the apocalypse

\*\*\*\*

watching the last  
space shuttle leave  
my feet gently  
kneading the grass  
me and my cat

... Christina Sng  
(Singapore)

## 5216 AD

torn  
broken  
abandoned  
irradiated  
devoid  
Earth  
  
overheated  
polluted  
overpopulated  
irradiated  
falling  
Mars

raw  
open  
free  
unexplored  
farther  
Europa

... Christopher Hivner (US)

## Six Moons Junction

On their planet  
the ocean tides often seem  
confused,

their version of  
Earth's mythical Wolfman  
can't stop howling,

and that nursery rhyme  
cow has six hurtles to jump  
instead of one.

Any mention of  
moon in song or print has  
to be pluralized,

the Old Man in the  
Moon has five pale brothers  
of varying age,

and though everybody  
knows that moons aren't made  
of green cheese,

if they were,  
there would be plenty to go  
around for everyone.

... G. O. Clark (US)

## New Planet Landscapes

Yes, the rocks are sexual here.  
Six sexes have been counted  
And there may be many more. They  
sand  
The wind in preparation, and grind  
In temperament below human  
hearing.  
The climax is stoic. If  
You witness the last of the process,  
Be careful. Move like a cat  
On ice. Avoid the pebbles.

... Ken Poyner (US)

## In Monster Years, I'm Old

First my claws grew brown and brittle;  
then I started drooling spittle.  
All my knees began to ache,  
and several legs began to shake.  
My stomach pooches, back hunches,  
scales have wrinkled into bunches.  
Lost another tooth at dinner.  
(It's growing back.) I'm growing  
thinner.

One eye is drooping on its stalk,  
both tails keep dragging when I walk,  
and now my nose has come  
unjointed!  
Seven ears all flop, unpointed.  
Still, I can hear if others shout –  
just hope my sex appeal holds out.

... Lauren McBride (US)

## Abominable Punctuation

craters  
mark the sentence left to mystery –  
black eyes staring from the snowstorm  
twinkling empty promises to all  
but the intrepid believers  
pursuing their beastly author  
if only to prove his existence  
as civilization brought Grendel  
to his knees and raised the digital  
totem to ward off the legends  
of footprints in the snow...

... John Reinhart (US)

### The Last Picnic

Pretend that nothing's changed as I guide you  
past the broken doors, the lines of empty cars  
beneath a dull orange sky. We keep upwind  
of the smell until we reach the sea.. You spread  
a tablecloth, I bring rocks to hold it down  
against the wind. You've prepared a mock  
picnic of conversation. Fictive wine and  
Brie. Sand sticks to your lips, you laugh  
a little too hard and I kiss you.

... Marge Simon (US)

The dogs follow sunset. They travel in packs,  
some with collars. I've grown too weak  
to beat them off. Days ago I'd try, but even  
the small ones are gone. We brought the gun.  
One bullet left. Yours, or mine?

### Event Horizon (Hexagram 56)

Pause at the bulwarks between cosmos,  
weigh the darkness searing within  
your own spirited synaptic sparks.  
Washed by the light, and absence of light,  
make your chance, risk your choice,  
fly and let fly, chassé across.

... M.C. Childs (US)

### Bloody Bones

Bloody Bones is his name and it suits him to a tee  
With drips and drops of ruddy life, he comes after me.  
I hear him in the cupboard and tip-toeing on the stair  
But when at last I confront him, he is never there!

... D.J. Tyrer (UK)

# SCIFAIKU

shapeshifter  
tattoos herself  
on herself – again

... John Reinhart (US)

crescent moon  
the Cheshire Cat vanishes  
leaving a smile

... Christina Sng (Singapore)

beyond the dark star  
the debris spiral signals  
echoes of empires

accelerating  
to the event horizon  
starlight going out

... John Hawkhead (UK)

android eyes scanning  
a single chrysanthemum  
what was this "beauty"?

ebbing suit power  
the glowing carpet of stars  
lights his fading eyes

metal fingers flexed  
he realized they were his  
"only your brain survived"

... Simon Kewin (UK)

after the cancer  
& the cryogenic freeze  
sleep was his best friend

... Herb Kauderer (US)

**Charles Christian** can be found at  
**[www.UrbanFantasist.com](http://www.UrbanFantasist.com)** and  
on Twitter at **@ChristianUncut**

***We are delighted to welcome Paul Graham Raven back to Focus. Paul is a mainstay of the genre, at the cutting edge of criticism, culture and theory. Paul offers us the first in a series — which promises to be a memorable discussion around fishtanks, narrative and not acting like your uncle...***



## **Episode 1:**

### **A Dip in the Fishtank Model of Narrative**

When the *Focus* team asked if I'd be interested in writing some pieces for the magazine, I accepted on one condition: that it wouldn't be "learn to write with Uncle Raven." Explaining why I didn't want to provide a writing-101 column is perhaps the best way to explain what I intend to do instead, so let's start there...

When I first started taking my writing seriously, perhaps a decade and change ago, I got very hung up on what we might call the *mechanics of the process*. This probably emerges from the legacy of the way in which writing was taught when I was at school – lots of effort on grammar and spelling and punctuation, but none on meaning and comprehension – but I suspect we might also lay the blame on the countless how-to-write books and blogs I consumed during those years.

To be clear, many of those books and blogs were useful, at least in part, and I wish to cast no aspersions on their authors: they are, after all, answering exactly the questions that developing writers ask, which tend to be rather instrumental in nature, focussed more on the production (and/or marketing) of a manuscript than the development of a story. And producing and marketing manuscripts is a significant part of the game, assuming you're writing for anything other than your own satisfaction: so I learned how sentences and paragraphs should work; I learned to bullet-list my plots and carve them up into scenes; I learned to trim prose that doesn't advance the story (or rather I learned that I *should*); I learned to finish manuscripts, format them and send them out. These are all needful skills, and I was sorely needful of them... and still am, frankly. Hence my disinterest in providing how-to-write advice: there's nothing I can teach you about the mechanics of writing that dozens of other people couldn't teach you far more thoroughly and effectively, and it would be absurd for me to pretend or imagine otherwise.

But I found I had further questions that the how-to-write folks couldn't or wouldn't address – questions which are not necessarily specific to speculative genres, but which do seem to me more prevalent there. While the sheer entertainment value of a good yarn shouldn't be discounted, what has kept me coming back to speculative fiction is the way in which it allows us to think about human experience in the broadest possible sense, and ask the "the big questions."

I don't want to get mired in genre exceptionalism here, but I think we can reasonably claim that speculative fiction accommodates a wider range of "big questions" thanks to its refusal to limit itself to using the status quo as its setting. Literature set in the reality contemporary to its creation *may* comment upon that reality (if it so chooses, though much of what gets labelled "literary" seems not to), but speculative fiction – much like historical fiction, with which Kim Stanley Robinson claims the speculative genres share a functional kinship – *necessarily* comments upon the status quo, because it implies that *the story being told could not be told using the status quo as a setting*. (It is in this sense that Kim Stanley Robinson has argued for a functional kinship between the speculative genres and historical fiction: neither of them can do their work without displacing the action into a different context to that with which the reader is familiar.

This isn't always the case, of course: as has been pointed out many times before, the original *Star Wars* movie tells a story that could just as easily been staged in the Wild West (which is itself to no small extent a fiction, despite its ostensibly being grounded in historical fact), medieval Europe (ditto), or even imperial Japan (ditto); Manichaeon melodrama is easily replanted in any generic medium. But the refusal of the status quo as setting also allows for the possibility of stories where some or all of the assumptions inherent in the status quo no longer apply – stories which, as a result, highlight the influence



of the status quo on our own experience, by showing us how a different world (might, possibly) shape a different experience.

What I want to do with these essays, then, is take some of the theoretical concepts I've picked up in my own wanderings through the literary academy, strip out the fancy jargon, and show you how you might use them to think about story at a more abstracted level.

But before I can do *that*, we need to start with a shared understanding of how story works, and define a few basic terms: *world*, *plot* and *narrative*.

Let's start big: let's start with the *world*.

Every story has a storyworld; as suggested above, for non-speculative forms of literature, the world of a given story is a reduced version of the world which we all know, but the world of a speculative story is, pretty much by definition, different in some way to that with which the reader is familiar. At the risk of oversimplifying, this is what Adam Roberts and other critics are getting at when they describe science fiction as "an ontological genre" – but we'll come back to that point in another column.

For now, however, while we're talking beyond and across the fuzzy boundaries of genre, we can define the storyworld simply as *a four-dimensional imaginary space within which the events of the story occur*. If the idea of four dimensions is off-putting, dial back a moment, and recall the three standard spatial dimensions, length, breadth and height: a simple cube is three-dimensional. Now imagine the cube is a fishtank, with water and plants and fish moving about inside. The fishtank is four-dimensional, because the arrangement and interrelationship of the things within the cube changes as the entire tank moves through the fourth dimension, which is time. So if you set up a camera and videoed this metaphorical fishtank for a while, you could play with the fourth dimension by pausing, fast forwarding or rewinding the playback. A storyworld is just the same.

So, the changes and actions that you'd observe in your fishtank make up the plot of the story (or rather stories, for story is almost never singular) of the fishtank, as acted out by its aquatic cast of characters. (Bear with me, here.) It follows that you'll observe different changes at different levels of organisation and relationship, depending on how long you record for, and how much of the video you play back without skipping: a few days of footage edited down would reveal the daily domestic dramas of squabbles at feeding time, the diurnal patterns of action and rest; a few weeks or months might capture seasonal changes and breeding behaviour, and momentary tussles over scarce resources; a few years might reveal the decline and death of a large coral, or perhaps the Dickensian rise and fall of a vigorous gang of scavenger catfish. (See? Stories start writing themselves as soon as you've made a space for 'em.) The point being: once you add that fourth dimension, stuff starts moving in your fishtank. *Plots* are playing themselves out in there – and a plot is simply a sequence of events located within the four-dimensional imaginary space of a storyworld.



**Paul Graham Raven** has been writing, reviewing, publishing and critiquing science fiction for about a decade, because no one has yet seen fit to stop him. He's also a critical futurist and an infrastructural techno-ethnographer, which is a fancy academic way of saying he's interested in taking apart complex stories and seeing how they do the work of talking about futurity. He lives in Sheffield with a cat and some guitars.

Which brings us to the slipperiest of my three terms: *narrative*. Now, narration necessarily implies a narrator: a narrative is *a story in the process of being told*, and as such someone or something must be doing (or have done) the telling. So it follows that if a plot is a sequence of events located within a four-dimensional space, then a narrative is an observer's account of that sequence of events. Returning to our metaphorical fishtank, then, the aforementioned videos are narratives; the narrator is our imaginary videographer, who assembles a story about life in the tank by curating chunks of narrative (editing and compiling his video footage).

The most important thing to remember here – not just as a writer, mind you, but as a human being – is that each and every narrative is by definition subjective; it is a function of what the narrator has witnessed, as filtered through their perceptions and preoccupations. Let's go back to our fishtank cinematographer: thanks to the nature of his camera, he can't see everything that's happening at once. Every narrator is the curator of their own version of a story, driven by their own priorities and sense of what is important. Sure, he could zoom out for a wide-angle shot, but in doing so he sacrifices the ability to focus on what the smaller critters are up to; if he zooms in to frame some detailed action, he's necessarily leaving

other action outside the frame.: The narrator picks where and when to look and what to record, which means they are also picking (whether knowingly or otherwise) where and when *not* to look and *not* to record.

Note that in our increasingly overstretched metaphor, our narrator – the videographer – is outside the fishtank. As such, it's fairly obvious that he has a perspective on events within the tank which differs from that of the fish: he is quite literally outside of the storyworld, looking in. He may well have some sort of stake in the events that happen within, even if that stake is merely an interest in seeing what happens that's worth videoing; however, his stake in the outcome of a tussle between two fish over a particularly tasty tidbit of food, no matter how paternal his instincts may be toward said fish, is of a completely different character to the stake that the two fish themselves have in the same drama.

"Well of *course* the videographer's perspective is different, Paul," I hear you muttering; "after all, he's not a bloody fish." So pat yourself briefly on the back: next time someone starts banging on about intersectionality, you'll know you're fully capable of understanding what they're getting at! But for the sake of illustration, let's remove that rhetorical obstacle: imagine now that our videographer is sat next to an unfeasibly large fishtank containing, among other objects and living things, a population of human beings. (Deliciously Ballardian, wouldn't you say?) Now our videographer no longer has the excuse of not being a fish for his different perspective; he's just a person observing other people, right?

But he's still outside the fishtank, still outside the storyworld: as such, he can observe more of the tank at once than any single member of its population from inside; he sees has access to knowledge of the actions of other inhabitants which a single individual can't gather, and an understanding of – if not even possibly an ability to control and manipulate – the environmental context within the tank. It therefore follows that the narrative produced by our videographer might reveal a very different slice of the plot to a narrative produced by a person (or a fish, for that matter) whose entire existence played out within the tank. And it further follows that, to a character from within the tank, the videographer's knowledge of the storyworld and the events contained within it would seem godlike by comparison to their own.

I think this fishtank model of narrative is a good place to stop for now, as it sets us up for a long hard look at subjectivity, voice and point-of-view in the second essay in this series. After that, I intend to tackle the challenges of telling stories in other times in a third piece, before returning in a fourth to the ontology of storyworlds that I passed over above.

But in the meantime, I'll leave you with this question: who's currently narrating *your* story? And are they – or you – outside the fishtank, or inside?

- ENDS -

# BECOMING A BETTER WRITER...

by Dev Agarwal



No. 7 Structure

Sometimes you have the idea of what you want to write, but the story's structure refuses to be pinned down.

A practical strategy you can employ is to take a writer you know well, select one of their stories and then take it apart and rework it.

At its broadest this is familiar writing advice -- read widely and study other writers. But this technique can be applied in more detail. You can work at a more *granular* level and work on a line by line basis. If you're working from a writer that you enjoy and who has similar taste to you, then the story is more likely to

suit your own ideas. You won't be plagiarising so that shouldn't be a concern (more on this later).

A word of caution. If you're writing romance, look at romance writers, comedy, comedic writers. This will be crucial as by the end of the process, this modelling may control the *shape* of what you're writing.

Take a blank page and divide it into two vertical columns.

In column A write the opening line of the story and in column B your notes about it. Is it dialogue, character description, worldbuilding, exposition? etc.

Once you've filled up one or two pages in this way, you should start seeing how the writer established their story, how many lines they spent on dialogue, who spoke, to what purpose, how they moved the story forwards, and so on.

Your work in column B should mean that end up mapping a particular structure to a story. As *doing* is better than telling, here's an actual example: "Shades" by Lucius Shepard. This opens with:

"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."

Applying this method to only two columns to begin with, this becomes:

Column A	Column B
This little gook cadre	Racist epithet, Asiatic reference, physical descriptive word: "little", cadre suggests political affiliation, esp. communist
with a pitted complexion	Physical description of his face
drove me through the heart of Saigon	In motion, in a vehicle, through a city.
I couldn't relate to it as Ho Chi Minh City	Reference to Saigon and Ho Chi Minh City place the location precisely in the capital of Vietnam. The use of both names indicates historical significance of the Vietnam war, locating the city temporally. The narrator knew it as Saigon (pre or war-era name) but now it's known by its postwar name.

The story immediately throws us into both the protagonist's character and the setting. The opening lines show us a first person narrator who appears hostile and racist, perhaps due to his war-time experiences.

Turning to column B, this is where the real work is done for your story -- and why you're not plagiarising the writer. Looking at column B and our breakdown of the story, we're going to jump start your story. If we had a column C, it might contain this as a proposed structure to a new story:

A first person narrator travels into the heart of a city, or over it, if flying. He's travelling with a driver or pilot that the protagonist dislikes. The driver/pilot is disfigured in some way. This is possibly a detail that will resurface, e.g. there's been a catastrophic accident ten years ago and the pilot was injured. The protagonist was involved and his emotion (anger or shame) still colours everything he sees.

Saigon and Ho Chi Minh City are trickier as they're very precise, but the principle could still apply: "She flew me over to the capital. She called it New Home, but it was lodged in my memory as Victory..."

Substituting "flew" for "drove" is deliberate. You want to separate yourself from the actual word choice that the author made. Then through the redrafting, you can make more changes, inverting who the passenger is ("I flew her to New Home, or Victory as she insisted on calling it..."). "New Home" and "Victory" don't mean anything to us, yet, but they're words that resonate with backstory. This exercise is designed to help you structure what you're writing, so the task is to increasingly deviate from the actual story that the source author was telling.

You are not just repeating what you read. You are making a transition so that the author's structure helps you to craft your story. Just by playing with the original lines, Saigon and Ho Chi Minh City, changing the words, the means of transport and which character is driving, we begin to see different patterns and relationships emerge.

This technique works best with short fiction, but can apply to novels (preferably scenes, or chapters). The purpose of exercises is to help break through barriers when we write. This one gives us an opportunity to forensically analyse one particular writer (of your choosing) and then use that analysis to apply to what you're writing.

Good luck.

**Dev Agarwal**

A few years ago, I was on the Kings Cross train heading down from Leeds, and I got talking to one of my fellow passengers. This is not particularly common for me; I tend towards awkward politeness most of the time that I'm on public transport. But this man and I just happened to start talking, and, in violation of all codes regarding English diffidence, we got on to the subject of how childhood landscapes had shaped us. I think it was the flatness of the countryside we were journeying through that triggered the conversation; I mentioned how, growing up in Bradford, I was more used to hills. In contrast, my travelling companion was raised in the Fens, and, for him, home and childhood was a place of huge skies and distant horizons; a landscape that we almost entered as the train passed through Peterborough. I say 'almost' because that Fenland was located as much in his memory as on any map.

# CAPTURING A SENSE OF PLACE

BY TAJINDER SINGH HAYER

**Tajinder Hayer** is a playwright and writing teacher (and enthusiastic convention panel member). Here, he talks about the origins of his latest play and his creative process.

It was such conversations that triggered my play, *North Country*; a piece that follows three characters over the course of forty or so years in post-apocalyptic Bradford. I was interested in the psychological importance of local landscapes, and that train journey showed how, even with modern transport links allowing us to leap from place to place, they still hold a strong influence. By absenting this ease of travel, I wanted to use the post-apocalyptic genre to address 'home' and its complications, and Bradford was my particular Petri dish. Within that space I unleashed a devastating plague that reduced the population of Bradford from half a million to a few thousand; I then followed the three characters – Nusrat Bibi, Jason Alleyne and Harvinder Sandhu – as they attempted to rebuild their communities over the decades.

There is a retrospectiveness to the post-apocalyptic genre that makes it sit sometimes oddly under a science fiction banner; the post-apocalypse is often defined by the absence of science or by the revival of older ways of life (see David Brin's *The Postman*, George R. Stewart's *Earth Abides* or Emily St John Mandel's *Station Eleven*). It's natural, therefore, when trying to capture a sense of place in the genre to look at local history and geography. In terms of Bradford, there were clear natural markers to the city that first occurred to me in that conversation on the train: the hills. Or rather the valley, which defines the centre of the Borough, and the river whose crossing point came to name the original settlement (the 'Broad ford'). The Bradford Beck and its tributaries helped wash the wool and power the early mills that were foundations for the city's textile industry. They were also channeled underground as Bradford became the centre of a wool empire. It seemed clear to me that the river would eventually have to reassert itself in North Country by bursting to the surface after years of neglect. The image of nature resurgent in the city is a recurring element of post-apocalyptic fictions, but the inspiration in this case came from the city itself. Bradford's slow economic decline from the 1970s had left many of those wool mills in a state of disrepair that made them an obvious trigger for apocalyptic thoughts as I walked around the city with my camera and notebook.

I walked in order to imagine how my characters would navigate around this new Bradford: the roads that they would avoid because of collapsed sewers; the places they would get clean water; the green areas where they would plant their crops; the rims of the valley that would become the edges of their known world. It

was an exercise in post-apocalyptic psychogeography; a little morbid perhaps, but, when walking with a friend, it became a game of imaginative doomsday parkour.

But, to mangle the words of Thucydides, it is not just the walls that make a city. Or, rather, there's an interplay between the physical landmarks of the city and the people who live there. Those dilapidated wool mills had reshaped the demographic profile of Bradford not just in the nineteenth century, but also in the mid-twentieth when textile workers arrived from Pakistan, India and Bangladesh.

I am a product of those migrations, and two of the characters in *North Country* – Nusrat and Harvinder – are also the grandchildren of mill workers. The third, Alleyne, is a white farmer's son from the edge of the city. Ethnicity is difficult to avoid if you're going to write about Bradford; there is a picture of the area as a



**Tajinder Singh Hayer** teaches Creative Writing at Lancaster University. He writes scripts for the theatre (with companies such as the West Yorkshire Playhouse and Menagerie), radio (BBC Radio 3, BBC Radio 4 and the BBC Asian Network) and TV (CBeebies). His play, *North Country*, will be produced in Bradford in Autumn by Freedom Studios ([www.freedomstudios.co.uk](http://www.freedomstudios.co.uk)) and tour in Spring 2017. He has a ludicrously sparse website that he's still trying to work out how to use:

[www.tajinderhayer.com](http://www.tajinderhayer.com)

racially segregated and volatile place. The perception of ghettoisation (despite statistical realities that contradict it) predominates within the city, and the riots of 2001 created their own apocalyptic images to overlay the district: the rioters gathering in the town centre; disorder in the streets of Manningham; a burning BMW garage on Oak Lane. However, one of the great aspects of speculative fiction is the way it allows writers to reframe and interrogate contemporary issues (in this case, ethnic heritage and perceived separatism). The post-apocalyptic subgenre offers its own specific toolkit; the dissolution of societal structures means that you get the chance to question and play around with conceptions of national, regional and ethnic identity. In the post-apocalypse, we are all migrants and we have to decide what parts of the old country we wish to revive

or can no longer hold onto.

My research for *North Country* involved an exploration of the natural and man-made landscapes of Bradford, but I also wanted to convey the cultures of some of the people living there. My writing for theatre is often quite dialogue-heavy, so I had to find ways of representing the *mélange* of languages and dialects I had grown up with. It's easy to write characters that all end up sounding the same; it's natural to find certain registers that are comfortable and then just stick to them. However, we all have our own idiolects, and it's important (and really rather fun) to find the modes of speech that differentiate your characters. For Alleyne, I wanted to tap into a strong West Yorkshire dialect, so I wrote his lines often using phonetic spellings. This was not because I didn't trust the actor's ability to manage the accent, but it was, instead, a deliberate device that made me alter my sentence constructions when writing for the character. Nusrat's voice emerged out of the Manningham ethnolect – a contemporary West Yorkshire dialect influenced by Punjabi/Mirpuri that already points to the interesting linguistic fusions that might occur if Bradford is separated from the wider world after the apocalypse. By having the action take place over decades I could play around with the new resonances that places, people and language might acquire. So, a nominally 'foreign' word – *zameen* – crosses ethnic lines to become the city's primary term for land. Places are renamed – Bradford becomes the Borough; Manningham becomes the Threads. The post-apocalyptic genre loves to reframe geography (think about all the mythologised, renamed or destroyed Inlands, Drylands, and Tomorrow-morrow Lands that pop up in it).

This is what I did. I walked, talked, photographed and read the city as I wrote the play – all the while knowing that I was not trying to create something definitive. How can you sum up half a million people? How can you capture centuries of history in Bradford and along all the international threads that are tied to it? You can't. But you try to create enough layers so that Bradfordians can recognise certain elements (and complain that you've got your travel times wrong or that should've had characters settling in Heaton instead of Manningham). You try to lay down enough roots so that those who've never seen the place can imagine it; can walk up the valley sides and can hear people speaking. It might even remind them of the places they know closely, and, breaking the habit of a lifetime, they might even talk to someone on a train about a city they once knew.

*...one of the great aspects of speculative fiction is the way it allows writers to reframe and interrogate contemporary issues...*

Hey, there's a mythology in my fiction! Perhaps a few questions surface next.

*I don't know all the references in this story. Should I look them all up?*

*How is the best way to read this?*

*And lastly: This interpretation of the original myth/folk tale is so different from what I remember. Why?*

a particular cultural group could be considered a myth. Examples of the latter include the Babylonian/Sumerian myths and the Hittite myths.

Where are the borders to folk tales? Or fairy tales? Or legends? I haven't found a good or definitive answer to this question. Celtic mythology, for example, relies heavily on legends and folk tales passed down orally (and later written down in presumably much altered versions due to Christian influence). Written sources in any of the Celtic languages that date to pre-Roman conquest of the Celtic peoples have never been found. So either the Romans destroyed them or they never existed to begin with.

But let's get back to the original premise of this article: the art of reading fiction that contains myths, parts of myths, myth borrowings, or myth retellings (as opposed to mythology itself). First answer the following questions.

Do you have philosophy (i.e., ideology) masquerading as mythology in your science fiction? Or is it a mythological retelling with aliens instead of deities and science instead of magic? How can you tell the difference?

Has an existing mythology that you formerly loved crept into your fantasy but you don't understand what this new version is?

Are you having to deal with a post-apocalyptic twisting of twentieth century (sometimes older) interpretations of mythological frameworks? Or is it an entirely new mythological construction and you don't have any idea what the hell is going on?

If you answered yes to any of the above questions, then you're not alone. Since the mid twentieth century, comprehensive development and/or reinterpretation of mythological structures as a function of speculative fiction has reached novel (as in new or unusual) and interesting levels.

There are so many examples of this kind of treatment, that picking one and leaving out the others would be misleading at best and, at worst, would not even begin to scratch the surface, so that this article would quickly bog down into what-has-come-before. My intention is not to itemize (or to dictate as in the form of Campbell's Commandments for Reading Mythological Fiction), but to generalize about different ways to enjoy mythological fiction.

My favorite mythological aha moments are when I'm searching online for some immortal deity or approximation thereof, and, of course, the Wikipedia entry comes up near the top. I quickly page down to the *In popular culture* section. I'm always amazed at how many RPGs (role-playing

# HOW TO READ THE MYTHIC

BY SHARON KREAMER

Writer and editor, **Sharon Reamer**, writes for *Focus* for the first time. As with Priya Sharma's opening article, Sharon looks at the mythic. Here Sharon offers us a different perspective as she explores how to draw on the structure of myth for our fiction.

Relax, first of all and grab your towel. Do not consult your Jung *Sparknotes*. Put away your Campbell interpretative playbook. Myth is *equivalent* to fiction, at least according to the Platonists.

Carl Jung wrote extensively about myth as an archetypal metaphor residing in the human subconscious (or collective unconscious). He proposed that every person had a form of 'inner' interpretation of myth but that many elements were common to humanity. Joseph Campbell built on Jung's ideas and took the idea of the Great Common Myth underlying all myths and archetypes a step further. However, you won't need to know much about either of them or their philosophies to enjoy mythological fiction.

Okay, first a sort of handy-wavy definition of myth that I've borrowed from Mircea Eliade, perhaps one of the greatest mythologists of the last century:

Myth explains creation.

As Eliade was also well aware, this isn't a very complete definition. But it's a good start.

Classical mythology (Greek and Roman myths or narrative fiction that works with elements of such, like Homer's *Iliad* and *The Odyssey*) is what most of us are familiar with, but any body of knowledge existing within

games) and comics (and even how many comics that are not *Sandman*) borrow freely from the mythological body. But the borrowing often occurs without the resulting characters having anything to do with the underlying mythology from which they were extracted.

But that's really beside the point. Isn't it? Aren't authors allowed to use mythology as we see fit to round out our stories? And aren't readers eager to see new ways of looking at 'old' symbols? They're dead religions, aren't they? Except when they're not, but even then isn't the Old Testament also legit for re-imagination in fictional form, for example?

Good questions.

As an attempt to answer these questions for myself without a strict rereading of either Campbell or Jung, I have just started reading *How to Read a Myth*, by William Marderness, a philosophy professor at Stony Brook University. Marderness divides myths into four categories.

**Mythical Readings.** These can be classified as narrative or more simply, stories.

Mythical readings can include a past, present and/or future history of the narrative myth. So those authors who interpret and reinvent narrative myth (or predict something of the future through retellings) are creating Mythical Readings.

So, authors who do this are in good company with all those who've come before (even those who are not named Gaiman) and have attempted to retell existing myths and traditional folk tales/fairy tales/legends in a way that makes them comprehensible to us.

Morgan Llewelyn's novel *Bard: The Odyssey of the Irish* is an example of a mythical retelling (in a wonderfully evocative historical setting) of the conquest of Ireland by the Sons of Mil and the vanquishing of the Tuatha Dé Danaan. *Gods and Fighting Men* by Lady Gregory contains a simpler retelling of the same myth.

Roger Zelazny's classic, *Lord of Light*, although a challenging read, reimagines Hindu mythology in a fully science fictional, future setting.

Lovely reinterpretations of the legend of King Arthur can be found from Marion Zimmer Bradley, Mary Stewart, Parke Godwin and Stephen Lawhead.

I have a particular weakness for these kinds of speculative stories, whether they are historical, contemporary or future,, from Bradley to Zelazny, and, not surprisingly, these are the kinds of stories I am most motivated to tell.

As I understand it, the myths contemporary authors are telling as part of their stories are faithful *within* the narrative histories retold and perhaps not so outside of it. This quote, from page 122 of *How to Read a Myth*, explains this concept in a more lucid manner: Mythical reading reconciles various inconsistent versions of a mythical narrative. They are received as authentic, unified by their relation to the myth or myths that they contextualize."



**Sharon K. Reamer** writes speculative fiction. Through her imprint, Terrae Motus Books, she has published the five novels that comprise the Schattenreich fantasy series, a science-fantasy cross. She is currently editing her newest novel, *Daughters of Earth*, the first book in the Gravity's Gift duology, a semi-hard science fiction story of deep galactic colonization. She is also continuing to write in her Schattenreich universe, currently working on a novella and a very-near-future fantasy novel.

She teaches at the University of Cologne and coauthors papers with her husband, the preeminent archeoseismologist Klaus-G. Hinzen. In collaboration with several other authors, one of their recent landmark papers, Archeoseismic study of damage in Roman and Medieval structures in the center of Cologne, Germany, was published in *Journal of Seismology* (J Seismol, 2013, 17:399-424) and is an open source paper available from Springerlink.com.

After four fulfilling years as assistant editor at the speculative ezine, *ALlegory*, she has been reading submissions for the last five years at *Albedo One*, Ireland's premiere speculative fiction magazine.

Sharon is an expatriate Texan lover of all things mythological. She lives in Overath, Germany, on the outskirts of Cologne with her family and two tuxedo cats, Loki and Finn MacCool.

**Cultural Readings**, as the name suggests, are myths associated with symbols or practices from within a particular culture. (as I understand it, also in a contemporary sense, that is, late twentieth century, early twenty-first century). This sounds obvious. All myths come from within a particular culture. But because of this, cultural readings rely on the knowledge and understanding of that particular culture.

Marderness uses the symbols of The Marlboro Man and the Marlboro Camel as two examples. Considering how culture has changed in relation to smoking (and will possibly keep changing), future generations may not be able to identify symbols such as this (the one steeped in the cowboy legend and the other depicting a comically cool character) because they may lie outside of any identifiable cultural context.

Likewise, will future generations understand the reference I threw in at the beginning of the article (grab your towel), taken as it is out of contemporary western cultural context (and perhaps only understood by a relatively small subset of that culture)? Douglas Adams created the symbol of a hypothetical galactic hitchhiker that also (in the form of his character Ford Prefekt) epitomizes the legend of the laid-back lifestyle of an earthbound hitchhiker.

Here's where RPG symbols also have their place. Not only do role-playing games reinvent myth, they often cloak it within a contemporary cultural setting as does much of urban fantasy.

**Extramythical Reading.** This takes place outside of the cultural context in which the mythology occurs: the myth becomes enigmatic (Marderness's word). Here's where post-apocalyptic restructurings have their place.

I'm thinking of two recently read novels in particular as brilliant examples of this kind of concept: Elizabeth Hand's science fantasy *Winterlong* and Emily St. John Mandel's science fictional *Station Eleven* where in post-apocalyptic earth settings, characters try to re-envision a culture that no longer exists through symbols and legends.

In *Winterlong*, it is the symbol of Death as transformation. In *Station Eleven*, the symbolism occurs at many levels but is strongest through the eyes of one of the main characters in her reluctance to abandon a particular comic book that has come to symbolize a private utopia of a world that no longer exists.

Alternatively, mythologies created entirely within a narrative – in other words, world building from the ground up – also fall into this category. Again, two examples from books I've recently read and enjoyed, *Babylon Steel* from Gaie Sebold and *The Raven's Shadow* trilogy by Anthony Ryan. The first is a science fantasy and the second epic fantasy, where the mythologies are wholly created within the context of the narrative.

Both authors have borrowed from humanity's mythological past in creating their mythologies, but the mythologies contained in these books are meaningless

outside of the stories they are told in. So, in a sense, these are Extramythical Readings because the reader is viewing from the outside.

**Mythological Readings** is the study of myth as myth itself and, at first glance, doesn't seem to have much relevance to fiction. But looking below the surface shows that this way of representing myth has many uses for fiction. First, this is where mythbuilders get their information, from all those scholars who have spent their careers deciphering myths. Wading from one interpretation to another is useful and enlightening.

As I began to gather a body of knowledge about continental Celts and their religion as well as Germanic mythology for my *Schattenreich* series, I searched for overlap between the two cultures and their symbols (a Germano-Celtic interpretation). Although overlap exists, there was not an abundance of such interpretations. H. R. Ellis Davidson and Georges Dumézil provided some interesting syncretism between the two systems. But for the most part, researchers did not cross cultural boundaries, staying within their respective fields of specialization.

Additionally, according to Marderness, in the process of deciphering, some researchers *remythicize*, in other words, they reinterpret the myths according to their knowledge and interpretation of the religion and the culture which surrounds it. Again returning to Celtic mythology for an (admittedly, older) example, French scholar and linguist Marie-Louise Sjoestedt in her *Celtic Gods and Heroes* (translated from the French) remythicized the legends of Cú Chulainn and Finn/Fionn. Her interpretation contrasted strongly with that of noted scholar Thomas O'Rahilly's *Early Irish History and Mythology*. Both authors' versions perform the function of remythicizing the original stories (in a sense, given that original sources are nonexistent).

Important for cases, as stated above, where original sources linking mythology and legends – and especially, in addition, the cultures themselves – mythological readings can transform the extramythical into something comprehensible. Exploring this last concept within fiction has all manner of possibilities and is possibly one of the most exciting ideas for engineering new mythologies and re-engineering old ones in twenty-first century speculative fiction.

As a reader, I'd love to see the King Arthur legend in space or a more updated version of Lord of Light with perhaps a different pantheon. And the realm of urban fantasy is still a great playground for reviving mythologies in contemporary society, no vampires or shapely women with big weapons needed.

As Marderness again says very effectively, "In mythical reading, mythical narrative forms out of the shapeless mass of the past, future, or both and functions as true history." To me, this rings a clear encouragement to authors to go forth and mythologize. I wholeheartedly concur.



Short stories, novels, and why we write fiction to different length constraints

# ON STORY LENGTH

BY CHARLES STROSS

Long-standing BSFA member **Charles Stross** needs no introduction to readers here. Mr Stross is a multi-award winning author across a range of categories *and* awards. His website is a repository of essential information for readers and writers and his enthusiasm and expertise covers an astonishing breadth of specialisms. The following article originally appeared on his website (<http://www.antipope.org/charlie/>) but, always willing to contribute more to the BSFA, Mr Stross has revised it specifically with *Focus* in mind.

The most familiar form of fiction in the English-language publishing world, today, is a bound book containing a novel. (Perhaps the second most familiar form is the series novel, which recycles characters of a setting from earlier works. These fall into two categories: those that continue to extend a multi-book story, \*or\* stand-alone novels that share a setting, hitting a reset button between stories, as with some TV serials.)

A typical modern novel is in the range 85,000-140,000 words. But there's nothing inevitable about this. The shortest work of fiction I ever wrote and sold was seven words long; the longest single story was 196,000 words: and I'm currently working on book 8 of one series and book 9 of another (both around the million word mark). I've written plenty of short stories, in the 3000-8000 word range, novelettes (8000-18,000 words), and novellas (20,000-45,000 words). (Anything longer than a novella is a "short novel" and was deeply unfashionable from about 1970 to 2011, although it's making a comeback in the ebook market. At least in adult genre fiction published on paper, novels seem to be sold by the kilogram.)

One would think that because it's so much easier to write a 5000 word short story than a novel they should be commoner. But trade fiction authors who write for a living seem to focus exclusively on novels, to the point where some of us don't write short fiction at all. Why is this?

Genre science fiction in the US literary tradition has its roots in the era of the pulp magazines, from roughly 1920 to roughly 1955. (The British SF/F field evolved similarly, so I'm going to use the US field as my reference point.) These were the main source of mass-market fiction available to the general public in the days before television, with print runs at least an order of magnitude greater than they are today. Reading a short story was cheap entertainment to fill in the spare hours, and consequently there was a fertile market for short fiction up to novella length. In addition, many of these magazines serialized novels: it was as serials that Isaac Asimov's "Foundation" and E. E. "Doc" Smith's "The Skylark of Space" were originally published, among others.

For a while, during this period, it was possible to earn a living (albeit not a very good living) churning out pulp fiction in short formats. It's how Robert Heinlein supplemented his navy pension in the 1930s; it's

how many of the later-great authors first gained their audiences. But it was never a good living, and in the 1950s the bottom fell out of the pulp magazine market -- the distribution channel itself largely dried up and blew away, a victim of structural inefficiencies and competition from other entertainment media. The number of SF magazine titles on sale crashed, and the number of copies each sold also crashed. Luckily for the writers a new medium was emerging: the mass market paperback, distributed via the same wholesale channel as the pulp magazines and sold through supermarkets and drugstore wire-racks. These paperbacks were typically short by modern standards: in some cases they provided a market for novellas (30,000 words and up -- Ace Doubles consisted of two novellas or short novels, printed and bound back-to-back and upside-down relative to one another in tête-bêche format, making a single book of 250-320 pages).

The market for short fiction slowly recovered, but never to its original golden age peak. In addition to the surviving SF magazines (now repackaged as digest-format paperback monthlies) anthologies emerged as a market. But after 1955 it was never again truly possible to earn a living writing short stories (although this may be changing thanks to the e-publishing format shift -- it's increasingly possible to publish stand-alone shorter works, or to start up a curatorial e-periodical or web magazine). The readership profile of the remaining magazines began to creep upwards, as new readers discovered SF via the paperback book rather than the pulp

magazine. With this upward trending demographic profile, the SF magazines entered a protracted, generational spiral of dwindling sales: today they still exist, but nobody would call a US newsstand magazine with monthly sales of 10,000-15,000 copies a success story.

A side-effect of dwindling sales is that the fixed overheads of running a magazine (the editor's pay check and office/admin overheads) remain the same but there's less money to go around. Consequently, pay rates for short fiction stagnated from the late 1950s onwards. 2 cents/word was a decent wage in 1955 -- it was \$20 for a thousand words, so \$80-500 for a short story or novelette. But the monthly magazines were still paying 5 cents/word in the late 1990s! This was pin money. It was a symbolic reward. It would cover your postage and office supplies bill -- if you were frugal. (In contrast, monthly newsstand magazine word rates were over an order of magnitude higher.)

There is some sign of a recovery in this area since the mid-00s. I can point to a couple of high-end web based markets whose peak rate (for "name" authors) is 50 cents/word; at \$500/thousand words they're actually competitive with newspaper op-ed writing. But in general, novels pay much better than short fiction. A 100,000 word mid-list novel that reaps a \$10,000 advance has netted the author 10 cents/word, plus the possibility of royalties if it earns out the advance. Moreover, because it's a single articulated narrative the author hasn't had to re-start from scratch with new characters, ideas, and settings every 5-10,000 words. A 100,000 word novel is much easier to write than 100,000 words of short stories, assuming you have the skill set to write either.

Anyway.

I felt it necessary to run through the history of the form in order to explain why, from the perspective of an ordinary working writer (who is trying to earn a living), short stories are only really good for three things:

1. Learning the trade
2. Advertising your wares
3. Fun and experimentation

First, \*learning the trade\*. If it's your ambition to write novels, why would you start with short stories? Many people don't; it's a peculiarity of the SF/F field that we have a tradition of starting with shorter works. We have more surviving and robust markets for short fiction than the mainstream and other genres. Additionally, when you're just starting out, trying to learn the craft of writing by tackling a novel is asking for trouble. Novels are complex beasts. To write one you have to be able to keep track of a whole bunch of different narrative structures that overlap, on different levels: the plot arc, character development, thematic elements, and so on. (For a whistle-stop tour of these topics I'd strongly recommend Stephen King's memoir and how-to, "On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft". He obviously thinks he



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The author of six Hugo-nominated novels and winner of the 2005, 2010, and 2014 Hugo awards for best novella, he has won numerous other awards and been translated into at least 12 other languages.

knows something about putting together novels, and who am I to say he's wrong?)

Short stories are short. Consequently, you can't cram everything in. As Isaac Asimov observed, short stories are about what you leave out -- and the shorter the format, the more things you can safely ignore. This makes them an ideal learning vehicle for particular aspects of story-telling. You can write a 2000 word character study in an hour or an afternoon. Someone else can read it in 3-10 minutes. It's not demanding. You can show it to other readers and other writers and they can dip their toe in the water and tell you what they think, without the sinking feeling that comes from receiving a 500 page manuscript.

Short stories lend themselves to workshopping and learning and training, so they may not be very commercial, but they're bloody useful all the same. (It's no accident that although I sold my first short stories in the mid-1980s it took another decade before I could produce a publishable novel -- and another few years after that before I was firing on all cylinders).

Secondly, \*Advertising your wares\*. This probably doesn't require any explanation, but: because short stories are short and easy to read, they're an easy sell to readers. It's much easier to try out a new author by

reading a short story than by diving into a trilogy. Or to try out the world on an on-going series by reading a single story set in it.

Importantly, many editors still read short stories to discover new authors. If you're an editor, one way to build a reputation in your field is to discover the next big thing. And because the next big thing probably starts out writing short fiction, a lot of the smart novel editors keep a weather eye pointed on the field. If someone appears out of nowhere and begins getting Hugo nominations for short-form fiction, and the manuscript of their first novel subsequently lands in your inbox, you pay attention.

Thirdly, \*Fun and experimentation\*. If you write novels for a living, your income stream for months or years in advance depends on getting the current project right. You are typically writing to a deadline, and novels are big and cumbersome: wrestling one into a new shape can take weeks or months. So there's a natural tendency to be extremely conservative with your writing style, to avoid big risks. (Examples of "big risk": writing a police procedural in multi-viewpoint second person present tense. Or using a highly unreliable narrative viewpoint who is basically lying to the reader, with the intention that the reader will eventually smell a rat and begin to interpret the \*real\* story hidden in the background. And so on.)

Short fiction's cardinal virtue is that it is short. If you've got a few spare days you can push out a novelette that does something so radical and experimental with language that would have an editor reaching for the smelling salts if you did it at novel length. (Unless it's the late 1960s and your name is Brian Aldiss.) A handful of readers will appreciate it, you'll get your stationary and printer consumables paid for, and you \*might\* win a shiny award from those who care. Meanwhile, you'll have learned whether or not something works, and you can use it later in your bread and butter novels. (By way of a personal example: I had an invitation to do a far-future space opera story for an anthology Jonathan Strahan was putting together. I had a universe lying around, under-used, from "Saturn's Children". I'd originally intended it to be a one-shot, but wanted to

see if there was any life left in it, so I wrote a short story (titled "Bit Rot"). Yes, the setting was still viable: I could work with it. So then I knew I could use it again, and did so in "Neptune's Brood".)

Finally, I have mentioned (not by name) the phenomenon of format shifts, when an entire wholesale/retail distribution chain goes away and a new one emerges, causing a shift in the type of work that authors are paid to write. A huge side-effect of the ebook shift is the sudden resurgence of the novella, a format that was previously in eclipse. A novella is the work of a month or two, rather than a week or a year: for the full-time author it's a gamble, but you're not betting a year's income on it. Novellas are too short to bind and sell as novels in their own right (with a few exceptions -- notably signed limited edition numbered hardcover runs that don't get discounted down to peanut husks by Amazon), but they thrive as ebooks at a price point between \$0.99 and \$2.99. And they've taken off massively in numbers and in readership. There's even an intermediate form emerging in the self-published sector, the series of novellas that permits an author to push out two or three installments on an ongoing story in a year. The novella seems to be a natural overlap point between a format that permits experimentation with and one that can pay its own way: I expect the field to continue to grow.

But if you were wondering why, as a full-time novelist, I don't write much short fiction these days, the reason is simple: I'm not learning the basics of the trade, and I don't need to work for chickenfeed to advertise my wares. Fun and experimentation is still well and good, but I'm in the happy position of having been given so much scope to experiment in my novel-length work that I seldom need to go there. Like many (but not all) working novelists I started out as short story writer -- but these days it's all about the books.

Mr Stross' latest or forthcoming works include: **The Nightmare Stacks** (June 2016), **Empire Games** (January 2017) and **The Delirium Brief** (July 2017)

*Short fiction's cardinal value is that it is short. If you've got a few spare days you can push out a novelette that does something radical and experimental with language that would have an editor reaching for the smelling salts if you did it at novel length.*

# Sygasm Call for Submissions

Sygasm is the official group for the upcoming Sygasm imaginative fiction anthology series.

This group showcases the best adult/grown-up short stories in a series of non-genre specific, themed anthologies in both print and e-book format.

There is no invitation system, everyone can submit stories as long as they fit the submission guidelines.

## TALES TO STARTLE & ENTERTAIN

When it comes to imaginative fiction, Sygasm wants to be as inclusive as possible. We are looking for stories across the broad genres of sci-fi, horror, adventure, mystery, the surreal and fantasy.

Particularly, we are after stories that take aim at the status quo, which actively challenge the common perceptions of the world we live in and the repetitious themes found in modern day sci-fi and other genres – but don't be put off, all stories are welcome for consideration.

There are no restrictions on story type, graphic or sexual content or swearing. Think 'Game of Thrones' not 'Star Trek'. Your story must be well-written, well edited and, most importantly, a great, intelligent read.

In a nutshell, we are looking for professional tales that startle and entertain. Editing and developmental advice can be given where needed.

## NEXT RELEASES:

'DEATH & DYING IN OUTER SPACE' - general sci-fi and horror.

Launch: early 2017.

**<https://www.facebook.com/groups/sygasm/permalink/1757161727855350/>**

'GODS, MONSTERS & SUPER-HUMANS' - general fantasy and sci-fi.

Launch: early 2017.

**<https://www.facebook.com/groups/sygasm/permalink/1757162387855284/>**

To submit, check the general thread links above for details.

In terms of payment, this is a profit share for contributors. The anthology is mainly for 'up and comers' with great stories. Each anthology will launch with print (Amazon, Createspace, Barnes & Noble) versions and in eBook format on Kindle, iTunes, Kobo, Nook, Smashwords etc.