
FöCUS 20

for SF writers

David Wingrove
on building a wall
Sue Thomason
tries to answer the big one
Michael Scott Rohan
talks about his trilogy
Dave 'W' Hughes
inside *Works*



Hi, I hope
you like me. I
like myself, I mean,
You have to these
days, don't you?
I'm what you get
when the artistic
types take a holiday and
leave it to us scribblers,
know what I mean! Hey!
I might even get to
like this!!

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FOCUS
for SF Writers
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Contributions: this space is for members of the BSFA, and for anyone else, who writes SF/F or related, to write about writing. If reading FOCUS inspires you, or you feel like saying something, please contact the editor with your idea or submit finished MSS. MSS will not be returned unless accompanied by stamps sufficient to cover postage (I will re-use the envelope you send it in). No fiction or poetry, except drabbles. There is no payment for publication.

Drabbles: a drabble has exactly 100 words (hyphenated words counting as one word), plus a title of no more than 15 words. Invented as a writing exercise by Birmingham SF fans, it deserves to become an artform in its own right, in my opinion.

Art: artwork incorporating words (comics) particularly desired

'The sky above the port was the colour of television, tuned to a dead channel.' The first sentence of William Gibson's *Neuromancer*. Could you have written that? Would you have dared to let that single sentence set the scene? 'The colour of television', more than a colour, more like a feeling. I've seen it, in the background of *Bladerunner*, a shallow studio sky. I try to rewrite it: 'The sky above the port was a lingering grey, like a television tuned to a dead channel.' I like it, but it is not as laconic, as blunt, and I wouldn't have stopped there. I would have gone on about lights or planes or the stink of oxides or something. The striking image might remain, but it would have lost its iconic value, that is, its value as a sentence one can admire out of context as a symbol of a whole way of thinking.

It is probably no accident that Gibson is writing in the field of sf, that the book that follows the sentence is a fantasia about computer hackers (cyberspace jocks) and corporations. The connection is not that fantastic, though. From *The Times*, recently: 'an assistant programmer at a merchant bank diverted £8 million in return for account and then gave back £7 million in return for a non-disclosure agreement protecting him against prosecution.' That's the life! Scotland Yard thinks such amnesties are immoral, but the practice is apparently widespread. Do I see the roots of an unholy alliance, the beginnings of a whole new criminal sub-class? Will it spawn a whole new genre of hacker-adventure that owes more to Westerns and thrillers than to science and speculative fiction? What happens to science fiction when the future catches up with it?

We who aspire to publication as writers of sf are, I feel, in the teeth of a rather severe storm. We have, on the one hand, a weighty tradition of other worlds, aliens, androids, etc, which we can uphold with honour. On the other hand, we have a bold and scary modernity that does not easily lend itself to extrapolation. Over there we have advanced scientific projects of bewildering sophistication and power that have achieved things that even sf writers have never imagined, and yet over here we are beginning to see that the physical and natural world has laws that are not broken with ispuny. So, what should we be writing about? What do we want to write about? Where are we, anyway?

The debate about what is and what is not sf has always been with us, and is intertwined with the debate about what is and what is not a story. The real debate seems to be this: what do we want from our literature? On what grounds do we judge a piece of writing to be 'good'? What do we expect from 'our' writers? FOCUS wishes to address this question from the other direction: what are we, who read sf and feel the urge to write, trying to do? In changing times, the purposes of writers also change, the underlying reasons for writing change. Old definitions become obsolete, not because they are or were in some sense incorrect, but because the values they enshrine cease to be our values. Phrased like this, the distinction between the subject matter of *Vector* and FOCUS becomes unclear; indeed, one wonders whether the distinction between the critical/academic appreciation of sf and the critical/analytic standards that writers set themselves is not a false one. Perhaps sf is a sort of literature where no such distinction can or should be made. Perhaps (horrible thought!) the whole idea that someone else can tell a writer what and how he ought to be, or is, or was, writing, is a swiz!

Let us therefore, as a community of writers, bear witness to our present concerns and interests, irrespective of the level of success we have achieved or the putative genre to which we claim allegiance, and see where this takes us.

Cecil Nurse

Every writer has a room with a desk, where s/he spends an inordinate amount of time alone, by and with herself. Inaugurating what I hope to be a long running FOCUS series, David Wingrove gives us a glimpse beyond the page to the world and work from whence it came.

A ROOM with A DESK

Circumstances are everything. Back in 1929, Virginia Woolf, in *A Room of One's Own*, wrote: "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction." Whilst Woolf was writing specifically of women and writing, her point is true of anyone, sex, creed, or colour notwithstanding. You must, in a very real sense, buy the time to write -- and pay for the living space you occupy whilst doing so. Thus, unless you have a private income, writing is normally an occupation that develops from the status of hobby -- something fitted in at those odd hours away from your paid occupation, usually to the neglect of a full social life -- into a part-time monomania, and thence to a full-time occupation, normally for a salary well below what you could earn at even the most mundane of jobs.

Almost paradoxically, much of a writer's time is taken up developing strategies to make time for the actual business of writing. It is almost a Catch-22 situation, except that you get good at it. You learn to live frugally, to harvest your resources, and -- if you're really determined about what you're doing -- to not waste a moment which could be spent on bringing forward the day when you can discard those strategies and just get on and write.

That said, I want to talk here of some of those simple matters of organisation and working method that have culminated in my own triumph over the simple laws of economics that govern the business of writing, and -- in passing -- to reflect upon some of the strategies that have brought me to this point. In doing so, I'm conscious that my personal story is far from the ordinary run of expectations. Nonetheless, if this piece helps to encourage others to persevere in the face of what sometimes seems like monumental indifference from the greater world, then it will have served some purpose.

First some background. I'm thirty five years old, the second child of working class parents, born in a block of council flats in North Battersea in 1954. There are few photographs of me as a child; mainly because for much of the first few years of my life my father, a sheet-metal worker, was out of work -- not because he wasn't willing to work, but because he was a trades union organiser, blacked by the local circle of employers. My mother worked as a typist in the local Co-op in those years and I -- along with my elder sister, Rose -- went to the local church school where academic expectations were zero. I mention this, in part, as an answer to Woolf's cry of anguish about her lack of advantages as a woman in the world of the twenties. She forgets how privileged she was to come from a well-beeled family and go to Oxbridge. Like all of us, she was born into what was (and still is, to a great extent) not merely a man's world, but a rich man's world; and this was so just as much in the fifties as it was in the twenties.

Ours was a house without books -- without any real tradition of literary or artistic interest; nonetheless, my sister and I grew up bookworms, reading everything we could lay our hands on in the local library. Academically we both did well. We 'moved up' as the saying goes, like many of our generation. Our parents had their educations terminated (with no choice in the matter) at fourteen. We, however, had the freedom to go on to

University if we wanted. My sister took that option. I, seventeen and in love when the choice came, joined a bank instead. Thus began my seven year sojourn among the levels of high finance; an experience I terminated the day before my twenty-fifth birthday. My return to education -- specifically to the University of Kent, Canterbury, to read English and American Literature -- was meant to serve a dual purpose: to win me the time to write (an obsession that had first gripped me in my twentieth year), and to give me a background in literature.

It struck me then, and I still believe it to be true, that it is not enough to know what you want to write, nor even to have put in years of hard graft. I also deem it necessary to have had a wide-ranging experience of the possibilities of literature to know how many different ways there are to write a book. To read Joyce, Beckett, Kafka, Mann, Lawrence, Woolf, Hawthorne, Marquez, Hesse, Barth, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Zola, Golding, Dickens, Proust, and others, is to provide oneself with a broad pallet of potential effects. It is the equivalent of a craftsman serving an apprenticeship, or a musician discovering the full potential of their instrument. This is not to deny that, as science fiction writers, a similar wide-ranging knowledge of the genre -- its theses, history, and styles -- is also necessary, merely to state that a broadening of your literary horizons is invaluable and perhaps even essential. After graduation I stayed on at College, pursuing first a Masters Degree and then a Doctorate. The latter was part-time. By then I had moved into a flat with my girlfriend Susan and was commuting to Canterbury from London several days a week. That was when the part-time jobs began: reading for publishers, reviewing and journalism, interviews, a little editing work here and there, a stint working as a temp for Manpower, and then the first few commissioned works for publishers. And all the time I was writing. More than seventy short stories and a total of sixteen novels. At first (long before my University days) I had sent them off almost religiously to the US science fiction magazines, and months -- it seemed years -- later got the standard rejection slips back. They were years of dogged perseverance: over a decade in total in which the only outward sign of my inner life as a writer was one small story in this very magazine -- a story called 'Photographs' -- and a filing cabinet full of my failures.

Some of the work was semi-autobiographical (two long novels), some of it overtly fantastic. Some of it was experimental a-la-Beckett, some straightforward SF. The best of the novels was a part-completed work called *The Dark Ages*, an intensely written book about a mute Irish blacksmith in the Northumbria of 935 AD, which I quickly recognised I wasn't good enough to write just then. There was much failure: artistic more than commercial, for very little of it was even shown to people, let alone pushed out into the commercial arena at this stage. But there was a point to all this failure, to this continuous process of trying again and again to get the thing right. It was difficult and frustrating, but I never once felt like giving up. It would come right. I knew it would. And in the meantime, I practised my art relentlessly, honing my skills, learning from all my failures.

Chung Kuo

1983 was a strange year. I spent most of it renovating an old Victorian house -- this same house in which I now sit, typing this out -- and organizing major structural alterations. I was working part time as an editor for a music publisher, Zomba Books, to help pay for things, as well as editing, researching, and writing much of *The Science Fiction Source Book*, and struggling to push my doctoral thesis to a conclusion. As a result, for the first time in years, I found myself unable to do any creative writing. However, in a very real sense, the effort was not wasted: I was buying time in the future while -- quite literally -- building that 'room of my own'. Late in the year we discovered Susan was pregnant. The house would be ready, and Sue's employers *Woman's Own* were willing to let her work three days in the office, two at home. We'd cope if I'd look after the baby while Sue was at work. And amidst all this -- that December, in fact -- I came out of my writing drought and began work on a short story called 'A Perfect Art'. The short story grew and grew, became a novel: a novel about a world run by the Chinese.

That novel, also called *A Perfect Art*, was far from satisfactory: it tried to cram the concerns of its five main characters and the whole world of Chung Kuo into a book of 80,000 words. I re-wrote it, hoping a polish would bring out its strengths, and, in mid 1985, showed it to my agents, Hilary Rubenstein and Ellen Levine. They confirmed my gut feeling. It was interesting and well written, but there was too much in it. The sheer weight of ideas and characters broke the novel's back.

With earlier books this was often the stage at which the manuscript would be put in a file, to be taken out occasionally and smiled at fondly before being put back again. This time it was different. Totally different. I was fascinated by the world and its characters and determined to persevere with the project. However, the problem remained: the structure of the novel, as it was, was unable to take the weight of material I wanted it to hold. I had a simple choice before me, one which a year of renovating an old house brought out with a stark simplicity: I could either reduce the weight, or change the structure. I decided to change the structure, to make it bigger and spread the weight.

I went back, to the childhoods of my characters and the genesis of the situation that had come to pass by the time of *A Perfect Art*. I began work on a new novel, *A Spring Day at the Edge of the World*. This time I used a completely different structure, intercutting a large number of short scenes and allowing the different plot strands to develop by means of juxtaposition, much in the way that John Brunner had in *Stand on Zanzibar*. The book that resulted was by far the biggest thing I'd ever worked upon: a novel in excess of 190,000 words. I showed it to writer friends while pressing on with *Book Two*.

It was perhaps at this stage that I first had an inkling of the scale of what I was taking on, and of the problems that were likely to face me both artistically and commercially in seeing the thing through. Back then -- and we're talking of late 1986 by now -- I saw it as a work in four parts, with *A Perfect Art*, in some re-constructed form, as the final piece of the puzzle. Four books of 200,000 words -- who'd buy such a thing? The advice that came back was to be less ambitious, to cut the books back to the nub; even to write something else. But by this time *Book Two* was almost finished. Again, its structure was different. The narrative was stronger, the connections within the book much more firmly made. I was convinced that I'd found the way of telling my story, and some of the more technical advice from friends -- their dislike of the intercutting and their desire to have a far stronger narrative -- confirmed me in that view.

It was January 1987 when I set down with Susan and talked things through. We decided I should go for it, and work full-time on the novel. I say full-time, but by now we had two daughters, Jessica and Amy, and three days a week I was househusband to them. What I mean was that I would cut out all part-time jobs, give up on my doctorate and concentrate -- in those hours when I wasn't with the girls -- on getting the novel right. It was at this stage that I renamed it *Chung Kuo* and began to piece together the exact structure of the four-part novel. Moreover, the further I got in, the more natural it felt. This was it. I was convinced of it. But now I had to get it right. To take the time to get it right.

What allowed me to do that was a matter of pure economics. By January 1987 we had paid off all or the major bills on renovating the house (some £28,000 in all) and, with Sue's salary as Fiction Editor at *Woman's Own*, we could (just) cover all outgoings. I had been earning between £6000 and £8000 a year from freelance activities: that vanished from January 1987 as I turned down commissions and gave up (except for a few months) all part-time jobs.

I began again, cutting out what didn't work, extending what did, going deeper and all the while discovering more facets of my story and the world I was inventing. Throughout, I had been reading extensively on China and things Chinese. All of this now came together. The novel found its voice, its style, its structure, and I knew -- suddenly, and without doubt -- that however long it now took, it would eventually be worth it.

It was April 1988 when I finally wrote to my agent saying I had something to show him. I had been promising Hilary something for three years. Now it was ready. Or almost so. I showed him 400 pages. He read it, loved it, asked for more. In late June I delivered another 450 pages, taking the story to halfway through *Book One*. Again he liked it. But how were we going to present this to publishers? I had no doubts about how to approach them. It was all or nothing. What if they wanted to take only one book and test the water with it before signing for any more? I was adamant. There would be no compromises. They would take all four or nothing. And if they took nothing? Then I'd carry on writing them until all four were finished and try again.

Agreed on our strategy, there was a further problem: that of presentation. I'd already given the matter a great deal of thought. In the rewriting I had greatly extended the material. *Book One* was likely to be half a million words long, with the promise of three more books of equal size. The simple economics of publishing -- of typesetting, buying paper, binding, etc -- were against such gargantuan novels. Again, it was a question of attitude. Of recognising the problem, but not compromising because of it. To be done at all, the novels would have to be put out in large print-runs. I felt they were good enough, strong enough, to win a wide audience, but how convince the publishers of that? After all, how does an unknown writer with no previous track record go about selling not one but four big books?

I spent much of early 1988 polishing *Book One*, but that was not the only thing I was working on. Alongside the writing -- in spare evenings, and odd hours when I could not progress with the book -- I worked on detailed synopses of the other volumes and an overview of the whole project. By this stage there was a quite definite structure not merely to the individual books, but to the project as a whole. It was an organism, obeying its own laws. Somehow I had to bring out a sense of that. To sell the thing not as a sequence of books but as a world, fully envisaged. To bring out into the light something of what was, at times, only half-glimpsed at the back of my mind. It was, to be honest, almost as difficult, as the writing itself and at times more so, but when, on 8th August 1988, I handed the whole thing over to my agent, there was enough there to give a clear indication

of the perspectives of the whole.

The rest, as they say, is history. Hodder bought *Chung Kuo* here for an advance of £125,000. Delacorte followed a month or so later with an advance of \$300,000. A week or so later, Doubleday (Canada) bought the project for \$80,000 Can. In 1989 Heyne Verlag bought the German rights for 91,000 DM. Interlo Gallo bought Italian rights for £25,000, and Bungelshunju Japanese rights for \$210,000 US. All in all a total in excess of half a million pounds. In each case, the publishers have bought the whole project and have committed themselves to publish what are now seven books.

The decision to move from four gargantuan books to seven still-rather-hefty ones has been one of the nicer accidents of commercial necessity, for the novel -- and it is a seven-part novel, rather than a series of seven novels -- works far better within those divisions than in its earlier shape. My original Book One, *A Spring Day at the Edge of the World*, has been divided into two: *The Middle Kingdom* taking its original story line to the halfway point, and *The Broken Wheel* (publication this August) taking it to the end of the original first volume. Similarly, the original Book Two, *Carp Pond and Turtle Shell*, has been split into two parts: into the new Book Three, *The Stone Within*, and Book Four, *Son of Heaven*. With the original Book Four, *A Perfect Art*, making up the final part of the novel, renamed *The Marriage of the Living Deer*, only Books Five and Six -- *Days of Bitter Strength* and *White Moon, Red Dragon* -- are unwritten, and even they exist in synopsis and in files bulging with notes, scenes, lines of dialogue, and details of settings etc.

Working Practices

And so to today, and to the routine of working on the project, now that its future is assured. This place is written, literally, between books. A week ago I delivered a rewritten version of Book Two, *The Broken Wheel*, itself a labour of sixteen months and an extensive reworking of material dating back as far as early 1986. Ahead of me lies Book Three, *The Stone Within*.

So, how do I work? What routines have I set up? The last few months have been very different, in that Susan has been at home on maternity leave after the arrival of our third daughter, Georgia, back in September. From early February, however, Sue is back at work and our normal routines recommence, with me looking after the girls three days a week while she's at work.

This as can be imagined, presents various difficulties. To get the writing done I work evenings and weekends. There is always the option, of course, of hiring a nanny, but I'd not feel comfortable with that, especially after helping bring up the other two. Besides, having to divide your time so radically does have one quite dramatic effect on you as a writer. Because you have three days on which you can do little other than prepare meals, pick the girls up from school or nursery, change nappies, shop, clean the house, etc, the hours that you do have free to work tend to be more precious. You don't waste them. You go down to your study and get on with the job. However, unless you're highly organised and conscientious, working in an environment with three children under six is potentially disastrous, and not to be recommended to everyone.

On 'working days' -- such as on others -- my day starts some time between 6.30 and 7.30, when the girls awake. The next few hours are hectic, getting them dressed, fed, and off to school (one of my jobs). Walking back, I get an *Independent* and, over a cup of coffee, I wind down for half an hour -- catching up with what's happening in the larger world -- before getting down to work, usually at about 10.00 am.

There are nearly always one or two things outstanding from the previous night's work and those are the things I tackle while mulling over the next piece of actual writing at the back of my mind. I attend to these few things with a notepad

open beside the wordprocessor, stopping now and then to jot down whatever has surfaced. Then, all loose ends secured, I get down to some 'proper work'.

With *Chung Kuo* I've departed from all previous methods of work. As much of the thing exists already, either in draft or in the form of a loosely-plotted synopsis, I work hard on preparing material before I come to work on it and as a result I've usually a fairly good idea of what's in each chapter before I come to tackle it. At the planning stage, therefore, each chapter has its own hefty loose-leaf folder, containing draft versions, ideas, research notes, lines of dialogue, settings, character descriptions, etc. At a later stage I break this down into specific scenes, once again giving each scene its own folder. This has the added benefit that, at odd moments when I don't feel like sitting down in front of the wordprocessor, I can take a few files upstairs and mull them over, adding to them whatever comes to mind.

For convenience, I've developed a highly-regulated system: blue folders for Parts, green for Chapters, yellow for Scenes. In a crowded study this makes for ease of identification, and when I'm well into a book a stack of these folders sits in a set of trays to the left of my wordprocessor -- an Amstrad PCW 9512 (with backup of the same make) -- waiting to be written up. As soon as a scene is written or a chapter finished, the appropriate file is emptied, all background material discarded and earlier drafts destroyed. As the weeks go by the piles to my left go down as the pile of finished manuscript to my right grows. As an additional benchmark, I always prepare an overall scene-by-scene working chart, which is collated up to the shelves behind the wordprocessor. This gives the basic outline of each scene in -- at most -- two to four lines, and enables me to know at a glance whereabouts I am in my story, in a project the size of *Chung Kuo* this is not merely helpful but essential. Book Two, for instance, was 435,000 words long in its third draft (trimmed down to 367,000 for presentation to publishers) and without some kind of 'map' to the territory I would, at times, feel quite lost.

It usually takes me a few hours to get down to a level of working where nothing can distract me. I work fuelled by coffee and jazz-rock, played very loud -- familiar stuff that I know every note of and than can thus shut out any other noise: Miles Davis, Coltrane, Soft Machine, Moog, Return to Forever. For lunch I grab a sandwich (or Sue makes me one and puts it down by the side of me) and only at around five or six in the evening do I emerge. If I've been lucky and really got into it, I can usually manage to get one or two scenes written, but even if there's a block -- a reluctance in the material to be used, as I always see it -- then there is always plenty else to be getting on with: the various tasks of administration, letter writing, editing, research. I try not to waste time. But the actual writing is always the thing that has highest priority. Except when I must -- for purposes of publicity or production -- I put off anything that gets in the way of writing, then tackle the outstanding tasks in a long session (often lasting up to a fortnight) once a book, or part of a book, is done.

There are numerous background chores surrounding a project like this. Beside the highly enjoyable business of plotting and researching, there is a need -- especially as I get further into the seven-part sequence -- to make sure the thing is consistent. To help this I have evolved a system of synopses, character files, and quick reference files to certain themes and topics within *Chung Kuo*. While working, this saves hours of trying to find some obscure passage or reference earlier in the text. I am, in a very real sense, my own encyclopaedist. Of necessity, I do not claim this as my own invention: when interviewing Frank Herbert back in 1978 over his working methods with the *Dune* books he told me about his system of

keeping character files, a system I had no use for until I came to write *Chung Kuo*. Now I understand perfectly why he did it.

Much of the above makes it sound almost as if I am over-organised. As if I am too much in control of things. That is far from true. Indeed, what keeps me coming back to my seat each morning is the thought of working against the constraints I have set myself -- of surprising myself. The rigid framework -- of synopsis, plotted scenes, etc -- exists as something for me to work against. Because it is there, I am confident enough not to worry about whether I will have anything on paper at the end of the day, but it also allows me to take off in whatever direction I want. Very often what I write bears absolutely no relation to what I've written down ought to be in the scene. At this level I am a very instinctive writer. Thus a kind of dynamic exists between the part of me that wants to keep it all reined-in, and the part that wants to go with the characters and see where it leads. That tension -- between letting go and reigning in -- is what, I feel, gives a story life. Sometimes, of course, it seems I have to abandon scenes I have written, because they no longer fit the greater scheme. Sometimes, however, they force me to rewrite the greater scheme. Such moments are what make it all worthwhile. And of course there are always several stages of rewriting and polishing to go before I am content with the material, stages in which the conscious mind can tidy things up.

I seem to have ended my day at five or six, but that is not so. Tentative with the girls, reading their stories, and then having dinner with Sue -- in the quiet after the girls have gone to bed -- is an important (if also hectic) part of the day. But afterwards, at 9.30 or 10.00 pm, I often go down to my study and begin again. Depending on mood I'll work through to 1 or 2 in the morning. And when I'm finishing a book, or working hard against a deadline, I'll extend that until 3 or 4. Such a schedule is quite hard on you physically, so I tend to have days when I just collapse and stay in bed, too tired to do anything. But the girls (and the urge to write) don't usually let me extend that beyond a day. Then I'm back to it again.

When I'm asked, usually at first introductions to people, at parties and the like, what it is like writing *Chung Kuo*, I usually answer that it is a bit like building the Great Wall. Like the Wall, the novel first appeared as several unconnected parts. These were built up, fortified, then, slowly, one by one, linked together. The sacrifices are huge, the work daunting, but the ultimate rewards are great, and not merely in commercial terms. When I've finally finished *Chung Kuo*, I'll have been working on it -- almost to the exclusion of anything else -- for twelve years. To have been allowed to do that is, I feel, a rare and delightful occurrence, but the important thing was taking the first step. And never looking back. Never for a moment looking back.

Written in January 1990, this piece was given as a talk to 'The Lunatic Fringe' (the University of Kent's SF Society) on Mar 2, 1990, in the back bar of the Bishop's Finger in Canterbury. Forty people were in attendance, and it was all hugely enjoyable.

From *FoCUS 19*: Write at most three sentences describing a couple (a man and a woman) in such a way that it is clear that they, or the person seeing them, belong to a culture several centuries hence, or to a parallel universe.

EXERCOMP

There were four entries, and four entirely different approaches to the problem.

It is astonishingly difficult, I have discovered, to ascertain the precise gender of hominid bi-peds, especially when our definitive works of reference go to such great lengths to graphically illustrate the distinctions, but omit to mention that these can be entirely obscured by the apparently arbitrary use of similar outer coverings, or other confusing devices such as identical cephalary shaping on the cranium.

In order that I might use the correct form of verbal address -- and thereby not cause any unnecessary offence -- I have just attempted to make this distinction by groping inside the outer covering of one such hominid bi-ped, only to be prevented from achieving anything more than a superficial investigation by a heavy blow delivered by its companion to my aedial superstructure -- which has quite disordered my digestive processes.

I must therefore conclude there are alternative methods of identifying the precise gender of hominid bi-peds which are not recorded in our so-called definitive works of reference.

Judith W Johnstone

Only one of them had a trunk. At first I thought it was feeding. Then I realised it was giving, not getting.

E. Miriam Kamp

Dexter and Julia look stunning in their latest colour co-ordinated daysuits, fully fitted and equipped with discreet environmental isolation features. The suits are manufactured in body-hugging P.M.V. and meet all of the requirements of World Standard WS 2475 'Protection from Atmospheric Pollutants' as well as being completely impervious to the current high levels of Ultra Violet and other harmful radiation. It is inspiring to see fashion reaching to outdoor wear at last and we hope that this trend will encourage more people to venture out of the shelters to rediscover the pleasures of a walk in the open air.

S.O. McDonald

I followed them because I'm a scavenger that way, even back here, and because she was asking for it, treating him like that. He was such a nice one too, all soft and fat and scratchable in his sweet navy-blue suit, that you'd think a lump like her, with her clumsy swaying walk and swollen breasts, would have taken special care of him.

But she ignored him as he clung to her arm for protection, and even made him pay when they checked in, so she'll deserve it when someone who really knows how to treat a man -- like me -- takes him away from her.

John Welsh

I was thinking of entering under a pseudonym and giving myself the prize, but it was too difficult and I didn't get around to writing anything. One thing I noticed was a bit of uncertainty about tenses, and a couple of outright contradictions that I have edited out. With something like this the tense carries a lot of weight, being almost the only clue as to whether what is being described is an action (implying the passing of time) or a scene (observed as a suspended moment).

The winner of this first exercomp is : S.O. McDonald. A £5 NSFA token, to be spent on any of their goodies, is on its way.

'Why do you write' is one of those questions nobody has any business asking. Still, it is a question every writer, especially in the nebulous beginnings of their practice, finds themselves asking themselves, though not necessarily in words. I asked Sue Thomason to give it a go.

WHY I WRITE

What am I trying to do in fiction that I can't do writing criticism/articles...

Tell stories. Share perceptions that have struck me as numinous, meaningful, and satisfying, but that can't be conveyed purely in the intellectual mode. For a long time now, I've been unable to finish any piece of 'fiction' writing; my own writing seems unsatisfactory to me, definitely second-rate (or worse) which is a continual cancer, but I can't stop doing it. A few months ago, I wrote this in an attempt to find out why...

I can't stop writing the scenes down (it's a habit? A bad habit?) but I can't imagine anybody else who's expecting 'fiction' would find them valuable or interesting -- but I want people to find them valuable. They are jewels to me, but pebbles off the beach to everyone else, I think. I can't stop picking up the pebbles and finding them beautiful. When I'm not doing it, I worry about my deficient perceptions. What I don't seem to be able to do is get anyone else to see that they're beautiful. In fact, half the time trying to talk about the pebbles actually makes people bored with them.

I see, looking back at this, that I am confusing the 'original vision' (whose worth is undeniable) with its expression in words, which may be clumsy, unclear, tedious etc. It's also clear that I'm unwilling or unable to take responsibility for the act of creation. A story is not a pebble I pick up off the beach -- but if I see it that way, as something I have found or perceived rather than something I have made -- if I don't look at a story and say 'I made this', I don't have to look at the story and say 'I made this badly'.

The experience of writing has been for me, for many years, the experience of failure. It's quite clear that what I write doesn't work, but I can't stop -- I can't stop wanting to get it right. I can't stop feeling disgusted with myself at the botches I produce. My urge to write is quite clearly a neurosis, I'd be healthier without it. I can't apply myself to it single-mindedly, I can't ignore it, it won't go away (the feeling that I ought to be writing, I mean; 'inspiration' can and frequently does take extended vacations).

I don't know what I'm trying to do by writing

THE NEXT EXERCISE

There was a noise at the back of the room and the shape at the desk whirled around

"What are you doing here?"
"Me? I wanted to see you."

That's the beginning of the first scene of a short story. Obviously you can't tell where this is, what sort of people are involved, or even who said what. Rewrite it, filling in some details and changing the style to suit yourself, so that the setting and emergent conflict are clearer but without substantially adding to what actually happens. No titles, please; just think about what you are trying to achieve in the first paragraph(s) of a story.

As with the first, the entry that most appeals to me wins a prize.

Deadline July 14, 1990

but don't leave it too long or you'll forget.

fiction. I'm clearly not writing for an audience (I don't have any particular audience in mind when I write). It's probably therapy, perhaps a replacement for the missing ritual or religious dimension in my life. The following quote is very meaningful for me (I think it comes from some how-to-write manual, which just shows that wisdom can be found in strange places):

Writing is a way of coming to terms with the world and with oneself. The whole spirit of writing is to overcome narrowness and fear by giving order, measure, and significance to the flux of experience constantly dining into our lives.

I think that may be the point of it all.

Earlier in my writing life it was very very important to me to be published. I think I felt that publication for money would somehow confirm or validate my identity as a genuinely creative person. I had a few poems and two short stories published for money. At the time this made me feel wonderful; it seems irrelevant now. I went to a (British) Milford SF workshop, where I had a very strong feeling of being an outsider, a marginal person; being somehow totally out of step, unable to communicate with the people I thought might be my peer-group. Since then I haven't produced any fiction worth submitting for publication.

A frequent reaction when I get excited about things in conversation is that the person I'm talking to tells me to shut up, or looks away in boredom, or changes the subject. I feel hurt by this. Right now I feel unwilling to risk being hurt in the same way by trying to sell my fiction. There's too much writing available at the moment. I can't think of any good reasons why people should spend money on buying my work rather than someone else's. So essentially my fiction at the moment is a process of talking to myself, because I know I don't have a sympathetic reader. Perhaps I write in hope that one exists somewhere in the future -- but I suspect at the moment there are simply too many people, and it becomes heroeer and harder to pay anyone quality attention...

FOCUS invites comment and submissions from other writers on this subject. No one-liners, please; we all know it is more complicated than that.

THE FATE OF THE WORKSHOP

Six offers to submit, six offers to criticize (with some overlap between them), three full negatives, and a vast amount of indifference makes, for the moment, a 'No thank you'.

If you would like to know what I might think of or might say about your writing, though, you can send me something (with return postage and an explicit request for comment) and I will do so. As long as you understand that it would be my own personal view, might not be good advice, and would not be from any position of knowledge about what might help you to get published. The only way to find that out, really, is to read what gets published and to submit your work to the editors. If you don't really want to do that, then, well, er, don't.

Ask a writer the right question about their work, and you may not get another word in edgeways. Ian Creesey dared to ask Michael Scott Rohan. Here's a fascinating insight into the concatenation of ideas that can make a novel.

ASK A WRITER...

I think most people know you from your current trilogy *The Winter of the World*, which is set twenty-odd thousand years ago in an Ice Age, with Powers in the world, and what would conventionally be termed magic set into smithcraft. So what led you to that kind of background?

Oh, a great many routes. First of all, just a generalised interest in mythology and looking at mythology around the world. I mean, what leads you to it first, of course, is an interest in fantasy and wanting to write fantasy, and being heavily influenced by people you like such as Tolkien and Le Guin -- which I do -- and Fritz Leiber as well, and various other people. But what led me to that particular background was a sort of convergent route.

I'm very interested in palaeontology, and so I was very interested in the way the world was in the Ice Ages and what happened in the interglacials and the general feeling that really it was like a sort of eraser passing over the world, this ice spreading from both ends of the globe and grinding everything in its path, and really squeezing all the climatic zones into a tiny band round the world from about the south of England to the middle of Africa. All the life in the world was there and beyond that was just a very variable zone which the ice came and went over, and in which nothing could really establish itself, with the lowering sea levels of course. So you've got a sort of band around the centre of the world of really quite devastated desert where things never changed much, and then you get all the other zones compressed fantastically. So I was thinking of that, that was one ingredient, and thinking of what it would have been like to be alive then.

And also thinking of Neanderthals -- looking at them and beginning to wonder, without actually postulating it seriously, what the Neanderthals would have in common with the contemporary idea of dwarves. Everybody's got an idea of Neanderthal, I mean you look at it in Doctor Who -- at present there's a character supposed to be a Neanderthal: he's a thick oak with gigantic brow ridges. There's a preconception of Neanderthals, which is based on the fact that the first one found was an arthritic old man, so everyone said, 'Oh, they couldn't cross their thumb across their palms, they walked around hunched and stooped and everything'. Well, they certainly looked odd. By our standards they almost certainly had rather Eskimo faces, with slightly slanted looking eyes, heavy brow ridges -- but not enormous great cliffs of things -- and sloping foreheads. And no chin. Or rather that suggests a sort of chinless wonder -- fishface. Their chins went straight down: they didn't have the protuberant chin that we had. One thing they did have, though, was higher brain capacity. The average Neanderthal brain capacity is actually larger than ours, which isn't to say that they did the same things with it. The other thing they had was very much curved bones in the limbs and heavy muscle anchorages, which suggests tremendous strength: they must have been much stronger than we were. And they were also quite a lot shorter. So I started thinking of a race that might have been ancestral to the Neanderthals, the traces of whom were wiped out in the Ice Age -- the Neanderthals being the result of blending human with this race -- thinking of them as the people we've come to know as dwarves. And I gave them the name

'duerger', because that's the Scandinavian form preserved in the north of England ... In some ways a lot of Old Norse is preserved more purely in the north of England than it is in Scandinavia itself.

Anyhow, another route was thinking about magic and thinking about the way magic is viewed in real life. I get very tired of fantasy where people mutter spells and waggle their fingers and the light comes out. The prime example that always drives me bonkers is the Katherine Kurtz Deryni series ... There was an interesting essay by Ursula Le Guin called 'From Elfland to Poughkeepsie' (in the collection *The Language of the Night*) -- it's worth reading sometime -- but she absolutely puts her finger on Katherine Kurtz by simply taking a passage and changing all the names and references to contemporary Washington. That's it, it's a thriller of pure intrigue. When she gets round to magic she doesn't use the same level of imagination she uses to create the intrigue. So when in the end of *Deryni Rising* you get magic for the first time, they're reciting fearful doggerel and wagging their fingers at each other.

I got very impatient with this, and I looked at the way magic operates in the old grimoires, the genuine spells. It's this tremendous, almost ridiculous compounding of effort, and you get the general idea that anyone who could stick that must have been a fairly phenomenal sort of human being. Also I looked at the way magic is treated in primitive societies. Very often it's the mystery of a craft that is considered to be magic, and it's like the horseman's word, you've probably heard of that, the general idea that there was some secret knowledge in handling horses that was only passed on to members of the society.

Now in many 'early' societies that we have around today, ironworking is considered an equally closed knowledge, a mystical art -- I cited a few of them in the appendix to *The Anvil of Ice*: the Touareg in Africa; and one or two of the Middle Eastern civilisations seemed to have regarded smiths as generally rather odd people. So that was another thing, thinking about smiths as magicians, and wondering what if smiths really were magicians.

And then these combined strands -- the immense labour involved, the complexity of magic, and the idea of smithcraft -- came together in the Viking way of making swords. Now, the Vikings had no very easy way to make good steel. They used to make rods of soft iron and then cook them in a charcoal oven. The result was that you'd get a certain amount of carbon steel, very hard carbon steel, round the outside of the rod because it picked up the carbon from the charcoal. With a soft centre. You couldn't do anything with that; you couldn't flatten that out into a sword or the sword would have sharp edges and break. And in actual fact in some early British swords that's exactly what happened. There's a museum somewhere in the north of England where there's a lovely relic of a fight between ancient Briton and Roman, and there's a Roman sword -- you know, one of these short swords, the gladius -- and a Briton has obviously hit the sword with his own sword. And the bloody thing's gone right round it! Wrapped round about three times, and the two swords are entwined, rendered useless! I've no doubt the Roman had to hit him with his shield or something like that, but there it is in the museum, exactly as it must have fallen on the battlefield. So what the Vikings did was they used to take these rods,

heat them up and wrap them round each other, which must have been a terrifying labour. They'd draw them out first until they were quite long, and then they'd wrap them round each other and then they'd flatten them out into a basic blade, and then they'd take the edge. And in general these were the best swords, and they must have taken ages to make, a tremendous amount of time. And so I began thinking of a magical sword like that, and of the consequences of a magical sword.

Plus, mythological dimension. One of the myths that nobody has used, and nobody has paid much attention to, is one of the most interesting, which is the story of Wayland the Smith. You'll find his name all over Britain, and he's in Norse, in the Elder Edda. And he's the only absolutely rock-solid cognate between Scandinavian mythology and classical Greek, because of course he's the exact counterpart of Daedalus. The story -- which must have repeated itself, I've no doubt, because it's too close to be coincidental -- is the brilliant craftsman imprisoned by the grasping king, who then makes himself wings and flies away.

And yet another ingredient was an interest I have in how much contact there was between the primitive races and men -- you know, the idea of diffusionism as against knowledge that just sprang up on the spot. Did the Egyptians pass on the knowledge of how to build pyramids to the South Americans or did it arise independently? Well, the answer is that it probably arose independently, but there's a lot of interesting evidence to suggest contacts nonetheless. And I was very interested in Thor Heyerdahl's ideas, because Heyerdahl traces this spread of influence across the world. And though I've no doubt that Heyerdahl is wrong half the time, there is evidence to suggest that there was quite a lot of contact between various races. And people who laughed at Heyerdahl thirty years ago are now saying, "Well, of course Heyerdahl was wrong," but it's established for example that the American Indians of the northwest coast had cultural links with Polynesia. And all the straightforward anthropologists accept that quite cheerfully and yet because Heyerdahl proposed it they can't accept that there was contact between South America and Polynesia. North America's different, but South America -- couldn't possibly happen, you know. Useful thing when you get scientific orthodoxy of one kind or another. The trouble also is that people like Heyerdahl generally go too far: they get their teeth into an idea -- the crank fringe -- they worry it to death and they ignore everything that doesn't fit their idea. But nevertheless there was the idea of a civilisation in the Ice Ages having spread from Europe to America, and just at the same time that the American Indian ancestors were coming in from the other end of the European continent across from the Siberian area, spreading into the northwest of America. And I thought, "What if there had been cultural contact? What if the Europeans were by nature coast dwellers, and so any trace of their civilisation would have been wiped out when the sea-level rose after the Ice Age when the water was liberated, so any archaeological evidence of these people had gone?" This is an intellectual game. I don't say it happened, but it was nice to make it happen and to make it a dramatic scenario: the idea of these elements of conflict.

And also I was thinking about "How did these people spread?" They say, "Oh, the ice came down so they spread across the ice." Would you walk God knows how many hundred miles across the ice when you didn't know there was another country at the other end of it? Of course they didn't go along the ice; they did what Eskimos do: they sailed along it. So I had a sea-fering people.

Now, the Indians of the northwest coast today are an odd mixture. They are the most civilised, by our standards, and culture of the North American Indians. The Pueblo Indians to the south had art and buildings and everything, but there is

a sophistication about the Indians of the northwest coast in everything. It comes partly from the fact that they lived a very easy life: the fish practically jumped up onto the shore and things like that. They had a very rich way of life, plenty of leisure for art. But they developed theatre you could see the beginnings of theatre at work; they were developing their own equivalent of things like the medieval mystery plays. Another couple of hundred years and they might have produced a Shakespeare. It was different, of course, it wasn't the same, but it was advanced, sophisticated, power-oriented society. So I thought, "Where did that come from? And where do those remnants of society come from today?" Plus, on the other hand, they also have some attributes that are intensely savage. They practised slavery, cannibalism, things like that. Now they also have a very straight-faced sense of humour, and it's possible they made too much of this to anthropologists; but nevertheless there is this odd bloody stress in an intensely civilised people. So I was wondering if there had been two peoples originally, racially the same: one mostly noble farmers and hunters, and the other a warrior cult who had been, as it were, forced into that mould. And that gave me a clash of cultures, if you like, in that there were three cultures at work there.

Then, and what was behind this, was that I was thinking of pantheons of gods. There are some very interesting resemblances between Scandinavian myth and the myths of the northwest coast. These are probably just the generalised resemblances you get in mythologies of the world. But one of them was the figure of Raven: Odin associated with ravens, and Raven the Trickster, who's also Raven the Creator, an immensely powerful god who appears to have a distorted sense of humour. And in the Scandinavian Odin also had something of a distorted sense of humour: he was a betrayer, he was a trickster, he would turn on you in battle. The rationale for this was that he needed the very best warriors, so he would lift a man up to the heights and then betray him so that he could take him off to Valhalla. An interesting explanation for all those nasty turns of bad luck. But I began to think what would happen if you identified the Odin figure with Raven. And thinking of the Odin figure as a leader of a younger pantheon who's basically friendly to men, and of the older pantheon, older and colder, based on the Finnish gods, who were a much more alarming lot and not at all friendly to men. I was thinking of older gods who were concerned with the world as a lifeless thing and who had their place and had had their time, and were trying to linger on and were objecting to life. And they seemed to be in many ways the ideal expression of the Ice.

I didn't sit down and plan out all this logically. I was stewing in my head for three or four years. It'd been talking about it on and off to Richard Evans, who's a very good and influential editor; he was at Arrow at the time, and he has discovered all sorts of people -- Dave Langford, myself, Storm Constantine. I used to go and see Richard -- I didn't have a book in hand or anything -- we just used to go and have these long and somewhat heavy lunches and talk through ideas and what would go well. And I'd be listening his ear for some years and then he said, "Listen Mike, this is the time. I now have a budget, I can buy new authors -- do you want to write this book?" So I sort of said yes and ran round the ceiling a few times and submitted a plan to him and he bought the lot.

This is a slightly edited extract from a much longer interview published in Black Hole 29, the Leeds University SF&F Society's fanzine, available 'free to anyone who wants it while stocks last' From The Editor, Black Hole, Leeds University Union, PO Box 157, Leeds LS1 1UH

Continuing his subversive but strangely uncontroversial series on how-to-write, your Editor turns his attention to Revision, or the Art of Taking Yourself Seriously.

NUTS + BOLTS: REVISION

I remember once happily spending a day revising a chapter in my then current book, only to find, reading it over the day after, that the revised version was not noticeably better than the previous one and in some ways was worse. Being an inspiration-driven writer at the time, I thought the lesson was that my critical faculties had not yet developed sufficiently to improve what my creative faculties could produce, but now I would say that critical faculties never do quite attain the same level; that, after all, is what 'inspiration' implies. My problem was not my critical faculty, but my creative faculty: basically, though I liked what I was doing, I didn't know what I was doing.

Diane Doubtfire, in *The Craft of Novel-Writing*, says: "I think you must be prepared to write a ted, unpublishable novel -- perhaps more than one -- in order to learn your craft." Of course I didn't believe her while I was writing that book and, ego being what it is, I still don't entirely believe that it is not publishable, but it became clear to me in the months after setting it aside that there are some things you just don't learn until you've finished and can judge the end result as a whole. One of these was that the excitement you feel, as a writer, knowing what is going to happen next, does not necessarily transmit itself to the page and to the reader, who does not know what is coming next. Another one was that a patch that is necessary but dull to write remains dull (but necessary) to read. These revelations directed my attention away from what I, as a reader, was most concerned with -- things like plot, suspense, characterization -- to what I, as a reader, was all but oblivious of: the way the sentences were put together.

James Herbert complained somewhere that people put him down as a 'popular' writer because his writing is so easy to read, unaware that that very readability is the product of a lot of directed effort and applied skill, as much effort and skill as creates a more 'difficult' work. Clarity -- the ease with which the reader can comprehend what is going on or being said -- is of course not entirely a matter of sentence structure; where the 'message' or 'action' is inter- or meta-textual a reader not aware of that level will find it heavy going. Nevertheless, clarity at the sentence level is essential, and this is the goal of revision.

To achieve this all superfluous matter that might distract the reader, or absorb his attention inappropriately, must be removed. This is often put as a matter of removing excess adjectives, metaphors, digressions, or anything that does not advance the plot, story, or other development, though in earlier centuries these very things were much admired, and, indeed, were integral to the pleasure that literary work provided. Perhaps a better way to think of it is 'the avoidance of disappointment': there can surely be no greater frustration than to spend time thinking about some obscure or intriguing passage, only to discover that it was a throwaway, silliness, or just something the writer didn't get around to deleting. Conversely, it is annoying to find that one's readers are getting caught up with things that have nothing to do with what you were trying to say.

Connected to this is the aspect that one might call elegance or beauty. This is not necessarily rounded sentences or ornate phrasing -- these are properly matters of style; rather, it is the sense that everything fits together. I am reminded of a music teacher of mine who, analysing Bach, came across a bar whose formal relationship to the preceding and following passages escaped him. Though it sounded nice, it suddenly seemed ugly to him. When he finally found the analysis, his relief and admiration of Bach's ingenuity were profound.

Concurrently with the elimination of superfluous material, one seeks to expand or fill out what is unnecessarily or excessively terse. The excitement of the first exploration of a matter, the first draft, very often results in things being left out, because their implications or importance were not noticed, because one was eager to move on, or because they seemed clear at the time but not in retrospect. Further, as you continue to think about what you have written, or come up against unforeseen difficulties or developments, your intentions and interests tend to shift, and what was previously adequate ceases to be so. In this sense, revision is not the exercise of a critical faculty at all, but part of the process of creation, brought down to and focused on the level of sentences. In fact, it is only when you begin to apply your creative attention at this level that revision begins to have any appreciable effect on the quality of your writing.

Connected to this is the aspect known as 'pacing' or rhythm. The goal is to have an evenness of intensity, so that each sentence and paragraph should be read, and is best read, at the same speed as the preceding and following ones. This is to reduce the boredom that sets in when a reader comes across 'padding', and also to reduce the 'missing things' that occurs when important things are embedded in wedges of fluff. Getting that evenness can be very hard work, since something that is easily said in ten lines may only deserve two, and if two lines must become ten, that passage comes to require five times the energy one at first expected.

In many ways, therefore, revision is not a matter of correcting grammar, finding the best word, and shuffling sentences and clauses to get rid of the too-shorts and the too-longs. This technical activity I now think of as 'polishing', and I find it is only worth doing when I am sure that sentence or paragraph is what I want to be there. Thus one can perceive two stages in learning the art of revision: the first is when one ceases to think only about the story and starts to think about the sentences of which it is built; the second is when one ceases to think about making good sentences and starts to think about what the sentences are doing. To reach the first you must finish your stories, to reach the second you must write good sentences, then, when you look back at what you've done, you will see that there's still something missing, and there's still a long way to go.

Waiting for the postman to deliver the latest editorial judgement on your work is not an entirely pleasant pastime, and it is all too easy to forget that editors are human beings. FOCUS will be regularly inviting editors to speak. The first to feature is Dave 'N' Hughes, the editor of Works, an interesting and coming small press zine.

NOTES from A BLUE PENCIL

I used to edit and compile a magazine for the staff of British Telecom. It was a very in-house thing, ie. If you didn't know who was having the micky taken out of them, then certain elements were lost, obviously. The magazine proved to be very, very popular with the staff. The sales reached upwards of one hundred plus, which wasn't bad for a 'local' thing. I charged a minimal price of 25 pence to cover the costs of printing and no-one objected to the price, in fact the Union and the Sports and Social Section took out adverts to help with the cost.

As the issue numbers grew, I found that the audience was becoming more diverse; even people outside of the Huddersfield district were asking for copies, and there was also interest from a few people outside British Telecom. So, I had a problem. I needed to expand, come out of the closet, as it were. I could no longer be 'in-house'. I began to ask for other material: stories, anecdotes, and cartoons. The response was pretty good, as was the material. Amongst the stories I received were two gems. The first was called 'Jake's Kingdom' by John Avison, and the other was 'Demi-Monde' by Simon Nicholson. The latter was far too long for the Telecom magazine, the former wasn't quite right. And without wanting to sound too pretentious or glib, both of the stories, I thought, would go over a lot of the reader's heads; imagine an article on gardening appearing in, say, *Electronics Today!* But, for some strange reason, I hung onto these.

A guy at work who used to help me with the occasional graphic works and layout was Andy Stewart. He quite enjoyed doing the layout and setting up, whereas I used to hate it: no matter how hard I seemed to work on the layouts, they always came out looking drunk. What I enjoyed was the typing and communications side, on which Andy isn't too keen. I asked him if he wanted to start a magazine which would concentrate on fiction, and because we could compromise, we decided to give it a go.

The hardest part of setting up the new magazine was choosing a name. I would go to see Andy with a list, he would give me his list and at the end of the day we would swap them back, only to find we couldn't decide on anything. Works eventually reared its head, coming together from three things: Emerson Lake and Palmer brought out an album called this (long before Queen, I might add) and each member of the band had a solo section on it -- each had their own 'work'; secondly, J B Priestley had a great collection of his better plays brought out in three volumes, all called Works; finally, I liked the idea that Works would contain works of decent literature, decent artwork, good works of production ... you get the picture.

Initially I wanted to bring out just a one off, test the water. I already had two fine stories: 'Jake's Kingdom' and 'Demi-Monde' (I knew they would come in one day). We decided to advertise in various magazines asking for material, plus I rang a few contacts and asked if they'd help, which they all did. About four months after asking Andy if he wanted to start a Science Fiction/Speculative magazine, we were ready for the printers.

We then had to wait a while before we could

advertise, announcing to the world that we were ready. In the meantime, Andy presumed that this issue we were doing was issue #1, he'd decided that we should go for it. We were committed.

Orders began to trickle in, then a few submissions, then a few more orders. It was a pretty nerve wrenching time. Initially we thought we wouldn't get enough contributions for issue two, then we thought we wouldn't sell enough of issue one to let us print issue two. There were more hurdles to leap, and each one got higher.

With the stories we decided that I would read them, then pass them to Andy. Only then would we discuss them. The trickiest thing was seeing if our joint decision would bear fruit and be liked by the readers. It seemed that they did. It is only recently, after getting enough future material, that we can now really tell if a story will work or not. There are exceptions, there always will be. Like with *New Worlds*, or any other magazine that printed 'new' fiction, and when I say 'new' I mean new in both style and content. With these sort of stories you have to wait for the reaction. It's no good insisting that something is brilliant when your readers don't like it; if you carry on publishing what they don't like reading, you're on your own. The readers make up the judging panel, the editor/s can only hope that the stories they offer in their magazine are the best they've had submitted.

The hardest thing that I myself have ever had to do was to write guidelines. As I'd had a bit of a dabble in writing myself just prior to starting Works, I sort of thought I knew how to get on the same wavelength as potential writers. I still believe this; that is why when we reject stories our reasons are genuine, not just excuses. I know what it's like to have a rejection that just rejects and doesn't tell why.

Pet hates

The first, and perhaps the most understandable, is the failure to include a stamped addressed envelope. I say 'understandable' because I myself was guilty of this when I first started sending out 'feelers'. But, I hasten to add, I have never forgotten to include one when I'm sending a story. I once sent out several queries to magazines asking for some form of guidelines, what sort of fiction they prefer, etc. And I didn't include an SAE. A couple of the editors wrote back telling me that I should be including SAEs, so to make up for it I bought a few magazines, guilt I guess. So, when we receive stories from people who, obviously, are just starting out, then we can stomach it. The frustration starts when you receive manuscripts from people who claim to be 'freelance' writers, and they don't include one. I really despair. How can they be freelance when they don't know the first basic rule? Even the slick, upmarket, professional magazines (regardless of genre) require SAEs, so what makes us any different?

The second 'pet hate' is the state of some manuscripts we get. I'm treading old ground here, but it's true. I've read a couple of times where editors bemoan the state of manuscripts and I used to believe that they couldn't be as bad as that. Not many are, but the ones that are make up for it.

We've had a couple where the handwriting might just as well be in Spanish or Russian; actually that is a bad analogy because with those languages you can at least get an interpreter. I'm not saying that all manuscripts have to be double-spaced, single-sided, name on each sheet etc -- these are preferences, but we must insist on the writing being readable -- that is the only 'rule' we abide by.

Another, and perhaps the most relevant to the writer, is when we reject a story, spend time reading it, trying to make helpful comments, and then never hear from the person again. I don't know whether they think they are above all that, perhaps it is our bad judgement in rejecting them? Needless to say I've never actually seen these writers in any other magazines. I was always under the impression that the easiest part of writing is actually writing -- the hard part is getting it criticised, and then to start writing the story; what's commonly called discipline. Coping with criticism is a process that needs to be learnt too, as is putting that criticism to use. At the end of the day, you're submitting to an editor, and he/she will respond as he/she feels. Send the same story to another editor and the comments will be different. If you expect to get published in a magazine then you have to have your story 'tailor-made' for the feel and atmosphere of that magazine, and who knows best what that should be? The editor. If you reject what they say about your work, then you're not learning the craft of writing proper.

What helps make it all worthwhile is when we get submissions from the likes of Brian Aldiss, Ian Watson, Chris Evans, Garry Kilworth, Mike Moorcock, Bob Shaw, and people like Andy Sawyer and Andy Darlington; the list of letters encouraging independent publishing is ever growing. What must be good for the writer in the current state of the British small press/independent publishing scene is the fact that they all have separate identities: each one is different. The potential writer has a wide choice of markets to choose from. For me, both as a writer and reader, this is what makes both these pleasures pleasurable. The editing is just the icing on the cake.

Words 5 is the current issue, 52 pages of fiction, poetry, and artwork. Writer's guidelines are available but reading the zine will give a much clearer idea of what Dave is looking for. 'Words' is becoming recognised as the only magazine catering for this 'new' beast called 'Mood' fiction. Atmospheric and in many respects haunting -- but not in a horror sense. Plot and character don't always have to play a main part in the story, but one has to remember that the story still has to keep the reader's interest at heart. It's all very well bouncing away with beautiful and esoteric writing, showing that you can paint a colourful picture -- please bear in mind that I don't want it too abstract. 5000 words maximum, anything longer will be split into two parts and must be good enough to retain interest. Not reading poetry for the next year or so. Payment in copies.

News is that with #6 Andy Stewart is departing in favour of family commitments. Andy Heald will be taking up the production side, with the result that from #7 Words will be laser-set. Issues 1 & 4 are sold out. £1.25 single issue, £4.50 a year's sub, from:

12 Blakestones Road
Slathwaite
Huddersfield, Yorks HD7 5UQ

STUFF

Scavenger's Newsletter is a monthly newsletter for s/fantasy/horror writers and artists interested in the American small press, but including all relevant markets. 32 pages A5-ish size, crammed with information about what seem to be hundreds of different zines, usually straight from the horse's mouth (the editors).

In the interests of bringing this market to the attention of British writers, FOCUS has arranged with the publisher, Janet Fox, to make a British 'edition' available. That is, she will send one copy to me airmail, and I will make photocopies as necessary. I have the Jan, Feb & Mar 1990 issues at the moment. Send me (Cecil Nurse) £1.25 for a single copy, or £6 for a six-month sub, and get a taste of what is really quite an awesomely active scene.

Correspondents, workshops, etc
Iain Layden, 115 Sparrows Heron, Kingswood, Sealdon, Essex SS16 5ET (tel. 0268-288810) is interested in setting up an SF writer's workshop or getting in touch with any in the area.

Shaun McDonald, 152 Stony Lane, Burton, Christchurch, Dorset BH23 7LD (winner of the first excomp prize) would like to get in touch with any writers in his area to exchange ideas.

Alexander Popov, 7000 Rousae, Alexander s. Petrov St 198, Bulgaria, has won several awards for short stories and has had his first novel 'Province Five' accepted for publication. He would like to correspond with professional and semi-professional SF writers in Britain.

Glasgow SF Writer's Circle meets at Synod Hall at the rear of St Mary's Cathedral on Great Western Road. Contact is Veronica Colin, 21 Queensborough Gardens, Myndland, Glasgow G12 5PP (tel. 041-339-8297)

Northwest SF Writers and Illustrators is a workshop based in Warrington. They publish a zine called *String*, of which they may still have copies of the first issue. Each contributor will receive a detailed written criticism whether or not their work is accepted for the magazine. Contact Roger Gulpan, 11 Stonehaven Drive, Fearnhead, Warrington WA2 0SR.

Writer's Support Round Robin works like Orbit (passing MSs around a circle of 5 members) but instead of fiction it circulates open letters to each other, to 'motivate each other to meet deadlines, help each other with research, toss ideas around for discussion'. Contact Sue Thomson at 111 Albemarle Road, York YO2 1EP

The Arvon Foundation program for 1990 is available, offering 5-day writing courses through from April to December. It is £155 for a session, with many bursaries and grants available for writers of limited means. There is no SF session, but there are several for beginning writers, and one titled 'Writing on Rock' (July 9-14) which will 'explore the landscape with a particular emphasis on the literal and metaphorical significance of rock', for anyone who wants to make like W. John Harrison. Contact The Arvon Foundation Ltd, Lumb Bank, Hebden Bridge, W Yorks HX7 6DP (tel. 0422-843714)

Deadlines

Thanks for the many compliments on Issue 19. Liz was responsible for everything except what I personally wrote. Deadline for FOCUS 21 is:

July 14, 1990

And remember, let's be careful out there.