Holly Lisle's Vision

A Resource for Writers

never give up on your dreams

Volume One - Issue 1
January/ February 2001

Inside!

Beyond the Basics: Creating the Professional Plot Outline

Making Histories: Thoughts on Convincing Pasts

Women and Childbearing in Fantasy

Plus Genre-Specific Articles, Book & Website Reviews, and much, much more

Holly Lisle's

Vision – A Writer's Resource

never give up on your dreams

From Holly Lisle

Welcome to the first issue of Vision. I'm delighted to present this e-zine, which is a joint project conceived, created and produced by the writers of the *HollyLisle.com* Forward Motion Writers' Community. In this issue and the issues that follow, you'll find targeted information on how to write successfully within various genres, general writing information and exercises targeted to all writers, a writing workshop that lets you try out professional techniques on one writing task, first-person experiences, book reviews and recommendations, and because this is an e-zine, live links to a multitude of wonderful writing resources. Every two months we'll have something new for you.

This e-zine, like everything on HollyLisle.com, is free -- part of the following philosophy: You can never pay back. You can only pay forward. Two professional writers helped me when I was learning my craft -- Stephen Leigh, who taught me the basics of writing professionally, and Mercedes Lackey, who taught me the basics of being a professional writer. The mistakes I've made in spite of their help have been my own. I can't repay them for the help they gave me, but I can pay forward, by offering my assistance and experiences to new writers. The other writers whose work you find in here are also paying forward -- offering what they have learned so far.

Take what you need from this magazine. It is designed to help you meet any or all of the following three goals, depending upon what you want:

- to improve your writing to professional quality
- to achieve publication
- to develop a professional writing career

If you reach your goals with any help from this e-zine, our community, or me, I ask only that you find a way to pass on what you have learned to writers climbing the mountain behind you. Pay forward.

Welcome to Vision, and to *HollyLisle.com* .

Vision
Volume ONE, Issue 1, January/ February Issue

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Vision
Lazette Gifford, Managing Editor

Those who write are the true people of vision. They see fantastic, exotic places in their minds, and they hear the voices of people who do not speak to anyone else. Unfortunately, writers always fail to transform the clarity of that vision into their stories. Words will forever fall short of capturing what a writer sees in the mind's eye; but it is the degree of failure that marks the read from the unread, and the published from the unpublished.

Holly Lisle's Vision E-magazine is a publication offering help to writer's pursuing that difficult transition between personal imagination and written prose. Vision is also a gateway to the Holly Lisle Forward Motion Writer's Community, where you will find other writers on that same path. Some may be behind you and others ahead, but the community is filled with people sharing similar goals and facing the same obstacles. The path to publication is easier to follow when you have guides and friends to help you along the way.

I hope that you find interesting and useful material in Vision. I also hope that you will join us in the Forward Motion Writer's Community.

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Beyond the Basics – Creating the Professional Plot Outline

By Holly Lisle

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• Creating the general story arc

If you start already knowing the beginning and the ending of your story, you're ahead of the game. If you don't, though, all is not lost. In this workshop we're going to develop a complete novel or short story plot, starting with a basic idea and finishing with a complete outline you can use to write your story or, in the case of a novel, to pitch the story to an agent or publisher.

So let's get started.

First a couple of interesting facts. It's tougher to come up with ideas for short stories than it is to come up with novel ideas. Novels are much less dependent on a single central idea. Next, although breaking into either market is tough, you'll actually have an easier time selling a first novel than a first short story in a professional market. Finally, novels pay better.

With those points in mind, then, let's develop a suitable idea for a story.

You can develop an idea from any of a number of directions. Start with a character, or a theme, or worldbuilding, or an idea that you got from researching. For this workshop, I'll use an idea developed from worldbuilding AND character development.

I like my character Cadence Drake, so I'll use her as the main character in this workshop. From her previous book, I know that she is a finder of lost things primarily hired by corporations who can afford her high fees, that she lost her best friend in a firefight, that she has a really cool experimental prototype spaceship for which she does not have legal paperwork, and, though this may or may not be relevant for this book, she has injected herself with a serum that is toxic to the recombinantly-created vampires who have developed a powerful cabal in her universe.

Just rehashing this abbreviated biography has given me some clues to the story I want to write next. And some things I don't want to write, as well.

I don't want to follow up on the vampire thread in this second story; I developed a huge universe for Cady, and I don't want to get bogged down in that one tiny facet of it and have the books stereotyped as vampire books. I do want to follow up on the death of Badger, Cady's long-time best friend and sometime lover, who was killed in a firefight. And I have discovered a device to get me into the story, as well.

Cadence doesn't have legal papers for her ship, the Corrigan's Blood, which she acquired when one of her employers tried to kill her in lieu of paying her. The employer ended up dead instead, and Cadence helped herself to his ship. I see the entry point to this story being the fact that if Cady is going to keep this ship - and she IS going to keep this ship - she has to acquire some good fake papers for it. And fast.

So from the following tiny bit of background:

- best friend & partner dead
- piloting stolen spaceship
- profession is finder of lost things for well-heeled clients

I have my opening set-up. Cadence is going to go looking for a place to get quality fake papers, and because the rightful owner of the ship is dead under suspicious, even dreadful, circumstances, she has to get the papers from someone not inclined to ask questions. This suggests moving into a dangerous situation, and I think she'll meet a dangerous but interesting character - one who is willing to give her the papers she wants in exchange for the barter of her services. He'll give her time-limited interim papers, and in exchange she'll find something important of his that has gone missing.

We'll worry about what that is later. For now, I have a solid opening for this new novel that accomplishes the following essential tasks:

- Introduces my main character
- Gives her a motive for moving from a situation of danger into a situation of more danger
- Brings in a second character of less than sterling reputation for the hero to play off

Time for you to do the same. With any combination of character development, worldbuilding, theme, and/or research, put together a story opener that meets those three goals. If you're a community member, you can work this out on the exercise board (*http://network54.com/Hide/Forum/message?forumid=70896&messageid=976865227*), where you can get feedback. If you're not a member, you can join here (*http://network54.com/Hide/Group/3188*). Or develop this on paper at home.

Got your opener now? Good. Let's move on to your ending.

If your first reaction is, "What am I going to do with an ending when I have only the foggiest idea of my beginning, and none whatsoever of my middle?" don't worry. You aren't going to do a completely written-out chapter. All you're going to do is figure out a basic landing pad for your story.

In my case, I'll make the following decisions:

- Cadence will live (the survival of the main character is not always a given in my books, and eventually Cadence will make an irreversibly fatal mistake - but not this book)
- She will find what she's been sent to find
- It will not be what she was led to expect, and this surprise will nearly cost her her life, and will prove fatal to at least one person the reader has come to know (though not necessarily to like)
- She will have her reckoning with the man who used her
- Maybe she will get her papers - that I'll decide later.

Okay - next part of your workshop. Go back to your original entry and figure out in general terms how you want the story to end. Try to answer the following questions:

- Does your protagonist succeed or fail in gaining the objective you gave him in your opener?
- Does your story come to an emotionally satisfying conclusion?
- Can you see yourself going through anywhere from ten pages to seven hundred and being happy to see the story end this way?

• Roughing starter scenes

You have your beginning and your ending. Now we need to add some middle, throw in some neat twists and turns, and give you

something so great to work on that you'll be excited about sitting down to work on your book every day.

So we're going to build some candybar scenes to move you from first word in your story to last.

I've mentioned candybar scenes before. [link] They're my analogy for scenes you can't resist writing - your big set piece scenes. In these scenes, your characters will fight battles, save lives or take them, fall into or out of love, meet their enemies in unexpected places, chase or be chased.

You don't need to work these out in any great detail. A line or two to give you something to shoot for is all you need. Even order doesn't matter at this point - that will come as you start fleshing your story out.

For example, I know in this story that I'm starting to tell now, I want the following things:

- a great spaceship dogfight
- Cadence meets a potential new partner
- meeting up with Tangerine
- run-in with a one of the minions of the stellar-regional underground that ends in a gunfight
- Cadence sides with the underworld against area law enforcement, which is holding whatever she's after
- A recent acquaintance is murdered in terrible circumstances, and law enforcement arrests Cady
- The person she suspects of the murder breaks her out of the jail at great personal risk

And so on . . .

Every scene I jot down spurs ideas for more scenes. As I run with this, I'll put together enough main scenes to peg into my novel, and then start creating transitional scenes to move me from on "candybar scene" to the next.

How many is enough? Depends on what you want to write. There's no set number for any project, but you need at least three scenes for all but the shortest short stories, and at least one big scene per chapter for novels. A 125,000 word novel can have thirty or forty chapters (or more) with two or three scenes in each. I use ten pages as my scene-length estimate, and either twenty or thirty pages as my chapter-length estimate, and work from there.

Your turn. Go back to your previous entry and click Edit (*http://network54.com/Hide/Forum/message?forumid=70896&messageid=976865227*), and sketch in between three and sixty one-line scene ideas. I suggest coming up with more than you think you're going to need, because if my experience doing this is any guide, some of your first ideas will be unusably bad.

• Adding twists and surprises

When you've finished jotting down your initial scene ideas, it's time to fix the fixably bad, and add some surprises to the already good. I'll give you a couple of demos. Take the following entry from my previous list of scenes:

- a great spaceship dogfight

Yeah, well - it's been done, hasn't it? What can I do with a dogfight in space that years of Star Wars movies, Battlestar Galactica TV shows, and space opera novels haven't done?

To find a unique twist to my dogfight, I'm going to look at my worldbuilding. When you discover that you have a potential cliché under development, don't panic and rip the scene from the book. Not without seeing if you can move beyond the cliché, anyway. Dig deeper - look at your worldbuilding, your character development, or your research to bring something to the story that wasn't there before.

In the case of the dogfight, I'm going to focus on the hyperspatial capabilities of the _Corrigan's Blood_ as developed in the first book and in my background. The CB has a Trans-Fold Navigational unit (more popularly called an origami drive) on board that, with the help of other drives in other realities, folds hyperspace into a neat decahedron around the ship. The ship can then move in any of ten directions, but only some of those ten (and away from heavily travelled routes, sometimes none) have ever been mapped. Unlike ships which have a normal TFN drive, the _Corrigan's Blood_ has no governor to prevent it taking uncharted routes. This has potential - if, for example, I give the enemy that Cadence ends up dogfighting an equally capable ship, the two could take evasive maneuvers through hyperspace, and through successive maneuvers could become so completely lost in unknown and uncharted space that in order for either to survive, both must agree to a truce and collaborate. I kind of like that. Now in order to make it work, I'll need to figure out who the enemy is, why he attacked, how much damage each did to the other's ship, and what measures each had to take to arrive at a truce.

With these details and this approach, my dogfight will not be just another clichéd shoot-out.

Time for you to take a turn at adding twists and surprises to your plot. Choose one of the most overused of your ideas. Use background, character development, research, or your story's theme - or any combination of these - to make your cliché into something extraordinary.

On your own, use this same scrutiny to challenge the direction and content of each scene - not just the clichéd ones, but the fairly solid ones and the ones that really sing to you. Don't accept your first vision for any scene as the way it must be.

I can't overemphasize the importance of this. I think the comment about my work that I receive most often from readers, critics and editors is, "I thought I knew where you were going with that scene/ chapter/ novel, but you completely surprised me. I think it's significant that the element of surprise was the thing about my first novel that Josepha Sherman, the editor who pulled it out of the slush pile, emphasized over and over again in discussing with me why she had decided to recommend the book to the publisher. If I have one "trade secret," one technique that I developed on my own that has helped me sell not just the first book but the twenty-plus novels that followed it, that's it. I'm willing to take a second look at clichés and figure out how to turn them into something new, which is a great way to lull readers into a false sense of security.

• Making everything add up

This is the process I use for developing novels. The outline that I get the first time through is subject to revision, cutting, rearranging, and midcourse correction. It's a working document - a tool - and as such it is never really finished. It is a reflection of where the novel is, and where I think it is going, and I usually abandon it completely three-quarters of the way through my book. But it's always there when I need to rethink something.

It will be there for you, too. A good plot outline can be any dedicated writer's best friend.

Making Histories
Thoughts on Convincing Pasts

J. S. Burke

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One way to coax the reader into accepting the setting of your story as genuine is to build your world on a convincing history. In SF, this generally takes the form of a future history--of Earth, other planets, or both.

A big pitfall with inventing a past is that the end result can wind up *looking* invented, as if you'd marked it all out with a straightedge and compass. And, if it does, you've lost a huge chunk of your setting's credibility.

The General Character of History

Though he's not without his flaws, one of my favorite historians is Arnold Toynbee, author of the ten-volume ***Study of History***, and I'm starting off with one of his major conclusions: that history is accidental and chaotic. This follows from his observation that environment--physical and intellectual--is the key force behind shaping civilizations, as opposed to race or biology. Biology is a limiting factor on culture--and therefore on civilizations, which are born from cultures--but environment is far more important. This is easy to see when you

consider that human biology has utilized[1] thousands--perhaps tens of thousands--of varying cultures, and from these cultures two dozen or so wildly different civilizations have flourished.

So, forget the idea of any event being inevitable, and watch out for extrapolating too faithfully from contemporary trends; the future isn't bound to realize our expectations. Fed up with cyberpunk and want a future where the Net either doesn't exist or plays only a minor role in daily life? Don't want to deal with quantum technology, which looks to be shaping into the 21st century's atomic physics? Go for it; as long as you provide good reasons for major departures from expectations, no one can fault you for being unrealistic. After all, a 1933 Presidential committee appointed to "chart our course" through the early 1950s had *zero* to say about jet planes, nuclear weapons, antibiotics, DNA, the re-establishment of Israel, the Communist revolution in China or the United Nations.

Approaches to Inventing History

There are roughly two ways of approaching the construction of a history: (1) Begin with a "present day" setting and work backwards to the events that caused the setting; or (2) Build a history first, then allow it to lead causally to a "present day" setting. Both are equally useful, and they're not mutually exclusive. E.g., you can start with a setting, then work back to establish its causal events; then throw in a few random happenings, follow where they lead, then adjust your initial setting to suit. I've used this technique myself, and it can create very textured and complex histories if you're willing.

[1] **Utilized may seem an odd word when speaking of cultures; nevertheless, it's appropriate here. It comes from the so-called "software theory" of culture: as the analogy goes, culture is to biology what software is to hardware. A culture is a set of strategies and methods that people use to solve problems; and, just as your desktop computer can operate on Windows 98, Windows NT, Linux, Unix, etc., so, too, can human biology (i.e., brains) operate on different cultures. The point is that culture is a thing that's used or utilized to achieve practical ends.**

Timescale

How far back do you intend your past to reach? Twenty years? 10,000? The answer to this question depends largely on the needs of your story. If the past plays only a minor role overall, go short: maybe a decade or two, while fleshing out only key events; it doesn't matter if the story is set in AD 2030 or 10,191. If the past is more important--to the plot, your characters, your themes--then it's critical to push further back and also know the events in greater detail. However, once you choose an approximate time scale--three decades, three thousand years--always keep it in mind as you write; I've found that when I do this, I'm able to subtly suggest the temporal depth of my history without resorting to "And this mess all started 150 years ago when . . . ."

Breadth and Scope

The companion coordinate to time is space: where your history is concerned, this is breadth and scope. Events extend not just over a number of years but over a given area--on Earth, or in the universe as a whole. Think of the breadth and scope of your history as the size of the history's stage, similar to the dramatic stage on which the story itself unfolds. But be careful not to confuse the two: a story with a limited dramatic stage can include a huge, sweeping past, as evidenced by Raphael Carter's *The Fortunate Fall*. The geographical area you cover with your history depends, again, on the needs of your story. For stories where the history isn't important, you can get away with detailing local events and merely sketching a few of the global or universal ones that have had the most significant impact at the local level. For future historicals, however, this won't suffice: only knowing about your homeland--the United States, say--and ignoring Africa, Europe, Asia and the Pacific will make your history seem unduly restricted and self-centered. As I'll discuss later, events don't

happen in isolation, and an assassination or scientific development 3000 miles away can have major repercussions on the very street where your characters live.

Real Templates

Down through the ages, certain chains of events have occurred like clockwork, though the exact character of the events varies with the period. It's good to keep in mind an old maxim here: history repeats itself. No matter how far-future or technologically strange your story, your humans are likely to be just as human as ever--which means they'll act and react to produce events that bear an uncanny likeness to those that have already gone on, once the events are scrutinized and placed in the larger scheme. Working from an authentic historical template can add a feel of realism, along with the potentially haunting realization (in the characters, the reader or both) that "we've been here before." Some good dramatic templates include:

(1) A technologically weaker culture is opened to the influence of a stronger one, and the weaker is transformed or wrecked via the influence. If transformed, the weaker culture may become a future enemy of the stronger and lust after the stronger's possessions or status. Examples: The American Indians and the Spanish Conquistadors; Perry opening Japan to the West and Japan's subsequent industrialization, militarism and imperialism; the Germanic tribes and the Roman Empire.

(2) A conqueror wages war on his neighbors and/or perpetrates genocide, is eventually defeated or dies after copious bloodshed, and the consciences of generations are haunted by his legacy. Examples: Napoleon and Imperial France; Stalin and the Ukraine Terror-Famine; Hitler, World War II and the Holocaust.

(3) A plague, natural disaster, irrational fear or widespread social disillusionment gives rise to a wave of religious hysteria that may bring tragic consequences. Examples: the Renaissance and Salem witch hunts; the Great Awakening in colonial America; the Ayatollah Khomeini's theocracy in Iran; 20th century Christian fundamentalism and televangelism.

(4) A conqueror consolidates a huge empire that is held together either by his personal charisma or ability to induce terror, but because he fails to establish lasting institutions, the empire crumbles soon after his death. Examples: Ghengis Khan and the Mongols; Alexander the Great; Charlemagne.

(5) The decline of a traditional social philosophy or religion (among the power-holders or the people) and the rise of a very different one leads to political coup or even widespread revolution. Examples: the Roman Republic's transformation into the Roman Empire; the revolt of the American colonies on the principle of liberty; the French Revolution against monarchy on the principle of equality; Nazi Germany's rise on the principle of racial nationalism. An interesting variant of this: a believer in the old displaced philosophy uses elements of the new one to help preserve the past. Examples: Bismarck's use of European nationalism to build a greater Prussia in the guise of the German Empire; Alexander Hamilton's aristocratic leanings justified by representative (as opposed to direct) democracy; Christian fundamentalists' (ab)use of science in attempting to prove a six-day creation.

(6) A new culture rises from the ruins of a collapsed or severely weakened civilization, then develops into a civilization in its own right. This is a very common phenomenon. A culture will tend to grow into a civilization if the environment is challenging enough to evoke a response from the people but not so harsh that it defeats all responses. Examples: Syriac civilization growing from ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia; the emergence of Hindu civilization from the Indus Valley people and the Aryan invaders; the birth of the West from the Roman Empire and the Germanic tribes; the rise of the United States

and the Soviet Union as superpowers from the post-World-War-II West (Europe).

You get the idea. The technology, specific circumstances and names of people may change, but scenarios such as these are likely to unfold just about anywhere and anywhen humans live. Above all, strive for a *dramatic* template; a history that reads like the diary of a grindingly-bored goat-herder on the plains of Mongolia won't exactly evoke a sense of wonder. For long or especially complex histories, you can work with two or more concurrent templates and have them intersect to synthesize an outcome event or even the starting event of a new template. Or you can build with several sequential templates and establish cause-effect relationships to bridge them. Which leads right into the next topic . . .

Cause and Effect

No observable macroscopic event occurs without a cause, nor lacks an effect, and your history can't be merely a collection of unconnected happenings. If a mad Pope sets out to conquer the planet, there better be a damned good reason . . . and a reason for *that* reason, and so on. Likewise, if your characters zoom around in hover-cars, you'll have to figure out who developed antigravity technology, and why. Events are unified by cause and effect, a principle that's suggested in the above scenarios.

A related but slightly more artistic concern here: the most memorable and engaging histories are those whose events
form not only a clear cause-effect chain but are also unified *thematically*. They make a specific point in a specific way. Probably the greatest example isn't found in SF, but in fantasy: Tolkien's Middle-Earth. The whole history of that world is built around the themes of cultural decline and the waning of the supernatural as time proceeds forward from the Creation: in the First Age, the god-like Valar walk the world and make war on Morgoth-- but, by the Fourth,

even most of the elves have vanished and the (decidedly less-cultured) humans are in ascendancy. But just as Beleriand could never quite match the elven home on Valinor or Rivendell compete with lost Beleriand, the restored kingdom of Gondor can't live up to the sea-lords of Numenor. And, eventually, mundane humans alone will inhabit the Earth and magic will be gone forever. Tolkien *shows* us something with his history; his collection of events points to something larger than itself.

Weird Things

It's possible to take the cause-effect principle too far. I always like to throw in a few minor but unexplained elements--e.g., an interesting event of secondary importance that isn't part of the main historical chain and whose causal antecedents aren't given. Since you won't be constructing an entire past day-to-day, this can have the effect of making your history seem more complex than it really is. Furthermore, it can draw a perceptive reader deeper into your setting by tempting him to guess just how a loose end *might* fit into the scheme, the way I used to wonder why the pink triangle is a gay-pride symbol before I studied the Holocaust. Or why some people had gory pictures of a man nailed to a cross hanging on their dining-room walls before I'd ever heard the word "Christian." And if you can make the reader wonder that way, you've seduced him into accepting your history as real.

Unity of Past and Present

Just as your past can't be a collage of unconnected events, neither can it just sit there on the page with no relevance to the story. Forge as many connections as possible between your history and your story's plot and characters; at best, make your story represent the final resolution of an entire event-chain or chains in your history. This way, you can achieve a unity of past and present that binds the story

elements tighter and also helps justify the necessary exposition of your history. I've just finished Holly's ***Vengeance of Dragons***, so I'll use her as an example: a few twists and turns aside, the overall plot of ***The Secret Texts*** shows the culmination and resolution of a thousand years on Matrin. The Mirror of Souls and all the references to the Wizards' War aren't just there for verisimilitude; an age ago, the cruel sorcerers called the Dragons were trapped in the Mirror--and, in the second book, they finally get a chance at revenge. No doubt they'll eventually be defeated--and, when they are, an entire chain of Matrin's history will have been resolved in the context of the story. In a broad sense, the stories of the characters and the story of Matrin become one and the same.

My favorite effect of building this unity is that the history often takes on psychological *weight* in the process. When we, in our world, hear "Vietnam" or "Pearl Harbor," the words stir emotions via their historical associations--those things have presence and gravity for us. This is a hard effect to duplicate when you're working with invented history, and I'm not sure how to consistently bring it about. But one route is to make the story of the world and the stories of the characters either the same or intimately related; make the people and their ancestors as inseparable as possible. When you do this, and your characters engage the reader, the reader may acquire the heaviness through the characters--as they tremble or become irate over the L.A. Holocaust of 2049, they may prod the reader to link those feelings with the event in his own mind, thereby achieving an approximation of the psychological weight we feel about our own past. The trick is not to convince the reader that a character is frightened or angry over an episode of genocide; rather, it's to make the reader himself (however mildly) frightened or angry over the genocide.

Perceptions of History

Don't make the mistake of allowing every society the world over (or universe over) to view a sequence of events or person from your

history with the same eyes. This is akin to inventing the alien planet whose inhabitants don't exhibit any racial, cultural or linguistic variation whatsoever. The United States viewed the decline and fall of the Soviet Union with feelings of triumph or happiness; meanwhile, Castro was panicking and the Russian people themselves stared down an uncertain road.

A related but more subtle issue is the perception of history or people over time *within* a single society or culture. Perceptions of the past change as political leaders, social conditions and popular ideologies do. A great case-study is Sarajevo and that city's decidedly unstable opinion of Gavrilo Princip, the teenager who assassinated Archduke Franz Ferdinand in 1914 and sparked World War I. Princip was a Bosnian Serb and member of the Black Hand, a terrorist group devoted to uniting all Serbs under one state at the expense of Austria-Hungary. His killing of the Austro-Hungarian heir made him an instant hero in Sarajevo, whose people longed to throw off the rule of Vienna and the Habsburgs. After the war, when the city became incorporated into Yugoslavia, Princip's name dropped from immediate awareness onto the list of Serbian nationalist martyrs--still held in high esteem, but not celebrated in the streets. Then, during World War II, he was nearly forgotten and seemed destined for obscurity. Under the communist leader Josip Broz Tito, however, Princip swelled into a national icon; in 1953, Sarajevo even opened a museum dedicated to him. At the time, he'd never been more popular.

But the deification wasn't to last. When all hell broke loose in the Balkans and the Serbian Army starting shelling Sarajevo in 1992, the irate Bosnian Muslims of the city declared their own war on symbols of the disintegrated Yugoslavia. The Princip museum was ransacked and a number of artifacts destroyed. Its curator, Bajro Gec, may have managed to save the bulk of the collection, but Princip's popularity collapsed with Yugoslavia: today, because of his Serbian background, he's political dynamite, and few people will talk openly about him. Eighty-six years have slung him through the incarnations of hero, martyr, "Huh?" figure, national god, and, finally, pariah. We

never stop making up our minds about history; patriot today, traitor ten generations from now.

A Final Word

If you think of your history as a collection of dry facts or a mere timeline that mechanically lurches to your "present day" setting, it's going to come off that way to the reader. You'll bore him as surely as a high school history text would. Instead, treat past people and events as no less real than your viewpoint characters and the world they live in; you may not present all the past details directly, but they'll be there as hints and shadows when you need them. That guy who shot Lincoln had a name, a face, a job and his own passions that drove him to assassinate the President. Cicero felt rage, fear and love; he wasn't a stone bust frozen in time. The Battle of Wake Island wasn't fought by casualty statistics; the U.S. Marines there were shredded and blown apart by the Japanese, and they made the seawater red. When you think about your fictional past, remember all that.

> Faithfulness to the truth of history involves far more than a research, however patient and scrupulous, into special facts. Such facts may be detailed with the most minute exactness, and yet the narrative, taken as a whole, may be unmeaning or untrue. The narrator must seek to imbue himself with the life and spirit of the time. He must study events in their bearings near and remote; in the character, habits, and manners of those who took part in them. He must himself be, as it were, a sharer or a spectator of the action he describes.
>
> Francis Parkman
> *Pioneers of France in the New World*, 1865

Women and Childbearing in Fantasy

By Bryn Neuenschwander

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Once upon a time, female characters in fantasy were relegated to being either damsels in distress or (if they had any brains) wicked queens. Of course, times have changed, and female characters are more common and varied than they used to be. Still, unless you write very high fantasy where people live in castles of sapphire and gold, you may want to put some thought into how exactly your women can get away with doing the kinds of things you want them to do. If you look at human history, the situation has, for a long time, more or less required women to spend most of their time on childbearing duties, and those duties tend to interfere with their ability to have adventures.

Let's start at the beginning, or close to it. In hunter-gatherer societies, women actually had very few children. This was partly due to natural causes; most hunter-gatherers were mobile, and a lot of walking (or other strenuous activity) can produce what's called athletic amenorrhea, where the activity suppresses menstruation. Plus hunter-gatherers tend to nurse their children for long periods of time, which can also decrease fertility. But it's possible, or even likely, that they also practiced infanticide or other methods of population control. Hunter-gatherers cannot support large numbers of children. A mother has to be able to carry her child until he can keep up on his own; this means she probably has children no more often than once every four years or so. She can only care for one toddler at a time. So while infanticide may seem cruel, it may be kinder than letting the child starve or be injured or lost during travel.

Then (ignoring, for the sake of simplicity, the archaeological debate about this), agriculture came along and people settled down. Now it became possible for women to have more children, because they didn't need to worry about carrying them on long journeys. Moreover, additional children were useful; agriculture involves a lot more work than hunting and gathering, so extra hands were welcome. (Side note: some hunter-gatherers spend less time getting food than you do at your day job. Maybe as little as 20 hours a week. Anyone who tells you agriculture gave humans leisure to sit around and develop art is lying.)

In fact, more children were not only possible and desirable, but also necessary. With agriculture and sedentism came a lot of other changes. Malnutrition was rampant; starvation was much more likely than it had been before. Now a crop failure could wipe a village out. Disease also skyrocketed, and close-packed populations led to more warfare and violence. In short, life expectancy dropped like a rock. Infant mortality rates were particularly horrendous. A woman often had to have ten children so that five of them might survive to adulthood.

So these women spent most of their adult lives pregnant and caring for children. They didn't have much choice; agricultural societies need big populations. And childbearing, combined with household duties, didn't leave them much time for other things. They certainly couldn't be warriors unless they found some way to avoid having infants.
A woman who actually survived past her childbearing years could probably enjoy some kind of position as a Wise Elder, but her odds of doing that were pretty abysmal. This situation continued through most of history. For lower-class women, it didn't really change until the Industrial Revolution.

But since when were we writing about reality? Modern society has medical improvements that mean women don't have to spend their

entire lives pregnant; their children are much more likely to survive. SF can follow this same model, of course, but what about fantasy? Well, it's up to you, the author, and how you handle worldbuilding. How common and effective is magical healing? Does the local religion encourage frequent bathing? Can magic help with sanitation? That will do a lot to keep disease down, and will help you avoid having to write about typical medieval squalor. At what age do women marry, and when do they begin having children? Lots of medieval societies had their women pregnant as soon as possible, so they could use all their child-bearing years, but this is actually a bad idea. Just because a woman's menstruating doesn't mean she's physically mature and ready to have babies. If she waits until she's eighteen or twenty, she and the child are more likely to survive.

Infant mortality rates are probably the single biggest factor affecting a woman's role in society. If many children die, she needs to have more to make up for it. She can try to avoid this cultural position, but that might mean being stigmatized by her peers. If most children survive, on the other hand, she can turn her time to other things. And you don't even have to go the infanticide route to keep the population down; can magic in your world be used for contraception or abortion? Give the women in your story these options, and they'll have more free time for getting into trouble.

This is one of the ways in which magic can take the place of technology. If you decide to make magic common, at least at low levels (small healing charms, not city-leveling fireballs), your characters will likely want to use it to improve their lives, much as we use technology. Of course, these "improvements" may well have side effects, but that's a tale for another article.

The actual writing of the story, along with the creation of the text, the choice of words, the dialogue, the style, the tone, the point of view -- that is the performance, that is the part of our work that earns us the title "writer."

Orson Scott Card,
The Elements of Writing: Characters & Viewpoint
©1988
Writer's Digest Books
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Matching Your Money to Your World

By Ron Brown

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There has been discussion in many places concerning money in speculative fiction. Many people adhere to the common currencies of gold, silver, and bronze. Others, especially science fiction writers, will use the ubiquitous 'credit' system. Each of these has its place, but any system must be matched to the appropriate world atmosphere. If your world is very young, doesn't have established governments, and survives on individual farming and small towns, you will likely want to rely on a barter system. It is not an easy system to deal with from a writing standpoint because you will need to make the trading difficult in order to capture the flavor of that system. It was not luck that drove civilization away from bartering.

Traditional medieval settings fit well with hard money. Hard currency must have some intrinsic value, like gold. Trading within a single ruler's land could be carried out according to numbers of coins, while trade outside the fiefdom would probably be carried out according to weight. That would account for the differences in coins. In fact, coins are not needed at all if you wish to rely on weight as an alternative. A dominant government system allows for certificates of deposit (paper money that represents hard currency deposits) or fiat money (money that has no hard deposit backing it). Certificates of deposit would be common in prosperous areas due to the difficulty in transporting large quantities of valuable metals or goods. If the nation is powerful or stable enough, the money need not have any backing, as the authority of the nation backs its value.

Future, non-apocalyptic worlds will likely also rely on fiat money. The different nations or planets will exchange based on the perceived stability of the governments and economies. A planet or group of worlds that holds a key to commerce will likely develop a dominant currency. It is possible that it could be so dominant that interplanetary trade would be required to be transacted in the dominant currency while local commerce could use the native currency. By the way, this could also occur in other settings, such as Roman domination of smaller countries. Roman coin was used for all commerce throughout the kingdom, while local trade used the native currency of the conquered land.

Post-apocalyptic worlds will fall into one of the categories above depending on the level of government surviving. The main difference will likely be in what is valued. Rather than a precious metal such as gold, the currency may become electronics, or fuel, or ammunition. The key to hard currency is that it is intrinsically valuable, not that it is gold.

The setting of your world will determine what money you use. Once that is determined, you just need to be consistent. For example, don’t set up a barter economy and then have villagers borrowing from a bank (there would be no deposits to borrow). Likewise, you wouldn’t have highly specialized labor in that setting due to the uncertainty of trade.

Money and trade will appear throughout a novel- length story, whether it was intended to play a major role or not. Taking a little time in the beginning to match the commerce to the world will prevent headaches later on, and will add depth to the setting that could bring the reader into the story.

Capturing Time For The Muse

By Vicki McElfresh

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"I like to write, but I just don't have the time." If I had a dollar for every time I have heard this excuse, I would be a wealthy woman. No one has time to write. Writing well requires sacrifice, dedication, and hard work, and practice. Unfortunately, practice requires time.

My dream has always been to write full time, but as a single parent, that dream is on a faraway horizon. I don't have free time, and finding time to dedicate to writing is a struggle. Writing during the day is almost impossible. I work full-time as a computer programmer, and I spend most of my day dealing with office tedium. In the midst of the phone calls, pages, and computer problems, my creative urge disappears.

By the time I get home in the evening, I'm tired, frustrated, and usually tense. The last thing I want to do is sit down in front of the computer for a few more hours. Besides, I still have to trick my son into eating supper and convince him that taking a bath is fun, both of which are major chores. When I accomplish these, I'm still keyed up from work, and I spend time playing games and reading stories to my son to relax. By the time he finally goes to sleep, I'm usually exhausted, but I still want to write. So I am left with two options; either get up a few hours earlier in the morning or fight off the exhaustion and stay up. Since I long ago made a promise not to watch the sun rise, I stay up and dedicate the hours between 10 p.m. and 1 a.m. to writing.

During those hours, I turn off the TV, listen to instrumental music, and, when I'm really serious, I also turn off the Internet. Giving up chatting and surfing while I write is hard, but if I want to reach my goal, I have to.

When I dedicated that block of time to writing, I also chose to write every day. My daily goal is 1000 words. Sometimes I do more, and other times I'm lucky to eke out the 1000. I write when I'm tired and sick. I write when my muse has deserted me and the world around me is falling apart. With every word, I keep that dream of writing full time shining in front of me. It is embodied in the little card on my desk that says, "Keep the faith, keep hope alive." I don't allow myself to make excuses, because if I do, I'll end up picking up a book or surfing the web, and my stories will still be waiting.

I cringe every time I hear the words, "I don't have time to write." Especially when I see that person posting endless messages on the boards or spending hours upon hours in chat. When I hear those words, I want to say, "You don't have time to write, but I find time to write. And if I can find time, anyone can." Writing every day may not be a possibility, especially for students, but making the commitment to write two or three days a week for an hour a day is a possibility.

I would be willing to wager there's a free hour in everyone's day. Just giving up the evening news, two sitcoms, or a drama show frees up an hour. Sacrificing an hour of sleep frees up an hour. There are 24 hours in the day, and I am certain that not each one of them is used up by work, family, or other responsibilities. Not writing because there's no time isn't an excuse; it's a cleverly disguised way of saying, "I don't want to."

In Praise of Praise -- A Second Look at Critiquing

By Lazette Gifford

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While reading through material for a critique group, you find a story that you think is wonderful. The prose is perfect, the story delightful, and you can't stop reading until you reach 'The End.' You look at it in amazement, knowing there's nothing you can offer to help that person improve his story, so you move on to the next one.

Critiquing stories isn't just about finding fault.

Maybe it's unlikely that you'll find the perfect story on-line. After all, it's hard to find the perfect story anywhere, including in print. However, there are times when I know that I cannot offer anything helpful -- except to tell the person that he has done a good job.

People forget that the writer wouldn't have posted the manuscript for critiquing if he knew it was ready for submission. He might just need to be reassured that it's good before he nerves himself for the grueling test of submission. But if you don't tell him the story is ready, you are failing in your job as a critiquer.

There will be people to tell that person that there is fault in the story. They might have even found something that you have overlooked. But quite often, the fault they find may be more related to the critiquer as a reader than a fault with the story. They may not be comfortable with the genre. Or they may, unconsciously, see a vision of the story as they would write it, and find themselves unable to disconnect those ideas from what they are reading. In other words, they may find fault that isn't actually there. If those are the only critiques the writer receives, is he going to know that he's done well?

Some people feel as though they aren't doing their job unless they find mistakes to correct. But the truth is, in saying nothing, they've failed at their work at the worst time. They have stopped just short of telling the person that he is ready to put the piece in the mail, which is the most important point, and one he should be striving to help the writer reach.

Many stories will need some small amount of work, but even here it does not hurt to remind the writer that he has done well. They've worked hard and long to perfect their craft. Receiving yet another list of unclear passages or missing commas is not encouragement to keep trying a little harder. Be honest in your critique, but include mention of what the writer has done right along with the mistakes.

(But also remember that there is another type of critiquer who will find fault with any piece, whether it is there or not, and the motivations usually have nothing to do with wanting to help a writer improve.)

On the other end of the critiquing scale is the piece you find that needs a lot of work. Going through and marking every problem might make the critiquer feel as though he is finally doing his job -- but once again, he would be failing.

A manuscript riddled with mistakes in punctuation, grammar, etc., is almost always the sign of someone new to the craft. This might well

be the very first piece that he has ever shown to anyone else. That person, getting his first critique and finding it filled with lists of problems, may never show a piece to anyone again. He may not write again.

It is up to the critiquer to judge the quality of the manuscript, and critique accordingly.

Not all stories should be evaluated at the same level. If you find a piece that looks as though someone wrote it who is new to the craft, don't do a line-by-line critique and point out every little mistake. Find general problems and review them instead. ("I see that you have some trouble with punctuation, so you might want to look at this book/this web site." "Try using the word 'said' more often.")

And then find something to praise: story concept, the dialogue (even if it is not properly formatted), or character development. A writer at this level of development isn't likely to make a great leap forward from first level to top level just because he has been shown a long list of mistakes he's made. The critiquer is there to help this person make one step forward at a time. Help them grow into their dream.

Remember, it isn't the job of the person critiquing to just find fault with a story. The real job is to help the other writer improve his craft. You might do that far better by looking beyond a list of mistakes -- or perfections -- and offering encouragement along with suggestions.

Building a Better Beast

Sarah Jane Elliott

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There are 1.5 million identified species on this great and wonderful planet of ours, representing only a fraction of the species actually out there. Current evidence shows that the total number may be anywhere from ten to thirty million. In other words, there are a *lot* of critters out there. And all of them fodder for the writer.

Fantasy is populated with many fantastic creatures, but most of them get their start in everyday, run-of-the-mill nature. Unicorns come from goats and horses. Dragons come from reptiles. Griffin come from eagles and lions. But all too often, writers fall into the trap of assuming that since these are fantasy creatures, they don't need to share any of the more common traits or limitations of their ordinary predecessors. Adding a touch of mundane to the magic can be a little trouble, a lot of fun, and give your tales a missing touch of realism that make them all the more believable.

Why fill your world with invincible dragons who look like snakes with feet? It's nothing new anymore, and it's not going to capture your readers' attention. But all you have to do is look at reptiles, and you're presented with countless variations on a theme that you can "borrow" for your story.

Reptiles are cold-blooded; they need to rely on their environments to regulate their body temperatures. If you make your dragon cold-blooded, this is going to dictate how he behaves. He's going to hibernate during cold weather, or he'll get sluggish. He's going to spend a lot of time curled up in his den to conserve body heat. He's going to like the sun and warm rock. You can work the dragon's horde into this too -- metal conducts heat well, so situate his den near some sort of geothermal heat source, like a hot spring, and have him sleep on gold, which would have picked up heat from the ground.

Don't just think about physiology -- think about behaviour. Some reptiles have frills, and generally, in the animal kingdom, big conspicuous traits like a neck frill or a peacock's tail mean a mating display. These displays are a means for one prospective mate to evaluate the other (usually the female checks out the male, but it's sometimes the opposite or mutual) to see if he's a suitable mate. And this means they're going to vary. Give some males big frills, some small, some lacy, some coarse, some blue, some red -- invent a system that lets you evaluate the health, or aggressiveness, or diet, of your dragon by the kind of neck frill he has.

And don't just stick to one phylum when designing you mythical creatures. Mixing and matching can be lots of fun! Griffin, for instance, are part eagle and part lion. This raises a number of questions. How do they groom? What do they eat? Flying takes up a lot of energy, so there must be something special about their digestive systems, or else they'd do nothing but eat. Do they give birth to live young, or do they lay eggs? Do they nurse? Are the males bigger, like lions, or are the females larger, like birds? Do they have a keen, leonine sense of smell, or do they essentially lack the sense of smell as eagles do? Once you know the answers to these questions, you can use them to manoeuvre your way around a situation instead of getting stuck against an invincible creature and having to resort to a miracle to get your characters out again.

You can also borrow traits from one animal to help out another. For example, centaurs, part human and part horse, are enormous, and

they're going to require a lot of air to keep themselves going. More air than piddly little mammal lungs can supply. We don't even use all of the air we take in. There's a dead space of air in the bottom of our lungs that just sits there -- it has to or our lungs would collapse. Birds, on the other hand, have a system of air sacs throughout their bodies in addition to a set of lungs. They breathe in a two-part process that essentially circulates the air through a circuit of chambers, which makes it a lot more efficient than our in-out method. That's how birds can still breathe when they fly up high, where the air is thin. In other words, a little air goes a long, long way. Your centaur is only going to need one heart, one digestive system, one liver, so fill the rest of the space with air sacs and chambers like a bird's lungs. Voila! Your centaur is no longer fainting every time he tries to walk up a hill.

But no matter what you do, it's important to remember variety. Variety really is the spice of life -- without it, species tend to stagnate and die out. And one of the biggest causes of variety is location. Someone from Canada looks different than someone from Africa, and both of them look different than someone from Japan. The same is true for plants and animals. You have subspecies within a species, and species within a genus. This is because of one of the rules of thumb of Biology: "the environment shapes the organism." Over time, species adapt to their current environmental conditions, and the farther apart populations are, and the bigger the barriers between them, the more likely they are to diverge. For example, say you have a big population of unicorns minding their own business, when all of a sudden a geological uplift sticks a mountain range between them (okay, so it doesn't happen quite that fast, but the appearance of mountain ranges is a common cause of speciation). One half of the population ends up stuck in a forest, and on the other side of the mountains the second half of the population finds themselves on a scrub plain. The forest unicorns have lots of shelter and few predators. They grow large and stocky, so they can force their way through the underbrush, and they're not particularly fast, since there's no need to be. The plains unicorns, on the other hand, are hunted by a large feline predator. The fast ones survive, and the slow ones are lunch. So the plains unicorns have long, slender limbs, are built small for speed, and are more of a cream in colour to better blend into the

amber grass. And not all of the unicorns within either population are the same -- some have fringe around their hooves, some are mottled, some are pure white, some have wavy manes, some straight. They can become subspecies, or new species entirely, depending on the niche they fill, whether or not there is gene flow between populations, and how long they have been apart.

Remember, there is no “model” individual for a species, because there must be variation between individuals in order for a species to persist. Think about it this way: what makes a ‘typical’ human, since even identical twins have some differences? Thus, your mythical creatures are going to vary too. New populations bring new problems, new puzzles, and new paths for your characters to take. New takes on an old idea are going to give your story a richness and flavour that will set your tale apart from all others and make it live. Variety is the spice of life, so season liberally.

Horror
Teresa Hopper, Associate Editor, Horror

State of the Horror Genre

By Ron Brown

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What happened to the horror genre?

This is a common question, and the usual answers drive those who wish to write in the fear-inspired genre toward the nearest pillow to hide their tears. People who watch the market know that the number of current new horror titles per year is significantly lower than it was back in the late 80's and early 90's. In fact, the 1998 numbers were a little more than half the total of the booming year of 1995.

However, few people realize that the genre is as healthy now as it was in the days immediately preceding Stephen King's series of bestsellers in the 80's and 90s. In fact, the low 1998 number is still much higher than any year in the early 80's, when books such as *Pet Cemetery* were published. The horror genre has never been very large. It has always been a niche market for those who enjoy the emotion of fear and are entertained by the exploitation of it. Horror has never rivaled suspense or science fiction for number of titles published.

This fact, though, is little consolation to the writer who wishes to break into the publishing world with a new horror novel. However, it must be noted that breaking into publishing is never easy, even in growing genres. Though some of the lesser quality books of the short-lived horror boom would likely not find their way to stands in the

current market, there is still a place for good writing and compelling stories.

Furthermore, many stories that would be considered horror by many readers have been reclassified in the changing marketplace. For example, Dean Koontz is now often referred to as a writer of “supernatural suspense,” while other writers are lumped into “dark fiction.” These differences are not entirely in name only; the stories do tend to focus on other aspects of the story as much as fear. Many writers looking for their first sale may consider slightly recasting their story if they face a wall from agents and publishers who do not wish to handle horror.

Lastly, the market for horror in small press publishers is very healthy. Some of these outfits are quite small, and some also do not put out a tremendous product. However, a good number of them will produce a quality book, pay royalties, and perhaps even a small advance. It’s true that going this route does not exactly produce the dream of the beginning writer to quit the day job and write full time, but it is a possible starting point in a writing career for those who love their genre and want to work toward making their living writing horror.

Poetry and Everyday Life

By Jennifer St. Clair Bush

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I think at one time or another, every person on this planet has written a poem. It might not have been a very *good* poem or one you'd ever show to anyone else, but it was a poem. And therefore, by default, every person on this planet is a poet. (I can't help but mention the cliché--but some of you don't know it.)

To me, poetry is distilled writing, an essence or a feeling that has been pared down to the bare bones. Oh, certainly there is poetry so prose-like you can't truly tell the difference, but most of the poetry I write, read, or listen to speaks to the part of me that delights in finding unique and interesting phrases to get my point across.

If you read a lot of poetry, you'll begin to notice the different types that are out there — from the short haiku to the long epic. From Shakespeare to Shel Silverstein, each poet has his or her own unique voice. To find your voice, practice by writing poems of different styles until you find one that fits. Not only will you become a better poet for the practicing, you will learn about the many techniques of poetry, whether you write for the rhyme or the rhythm.

The rhythm in all poetry lends itself well to reading out loud. Although there aren't many places available for poetry readings in this day and age, reading your own poetry aloud will not only show you the rhythm of your words, it will also let you see where some phrases might not quite work out as well as you expected. Before submitting your poetry for critique, read it out loud and listen for awkward phrases. You want your poetry to sing, not stumble over the high notes.

Listen to the world around you. Pay attention to your surroundings and see the poetry in every day life. Your own life can only be enriched in turn. Poetry lends itself well to everyday life -- something as simple as a drive to work can become a poem in the right hands. Practice with instances in your own life; a birth, a death, a new job. If you study the poetry in your day-to-day life, you will find plenty of fresh material to work with. And you only need a scrap of paper and a pen to write a poem. Everything else is up to you.

Writing poetry can be both difficult and fulfilling. A finished poem shines like a jewel on the white of a page, each line a polished gem of simple words strung together to create a beautiful whole. Please feel free to drop by the Poetry Board and share one of yours, or critique one already posted. I can almost guarantee you'll enjoy your visit.

Your Characters Are Not Puppets

By Anne M. Marble

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When your heroine behaves a certain way, your readers shouldn't mutter, "She went through that doorway only because that's what the author told her to do." We've all read books where the characters acted illogically. Don't you hate it when you feel as if the author is a puppeteer, pulling strings to make characters behave in unbelievable ways simply to propel the plot forward?

Many of the biggest problems in romance novels stem from illogical characters. Plot and characters depend on each other to function. Yet many romance writers forget this. When they want the plot to go a certain way, they force characters to do something that goes against the grain. This might make the writing process easier, but it will make it harder to sell your book.

The Silly Big Misunderstanding Plot

"Admit it, Jane! You were hugging your lover."

"Rafe, that wasn't my lover. That was my beloved stepbrother!"

If that exchange sounds familiar to you, then you've come across the silly big misunderstanding plot (SBMP). This type of plot is particularly notorious in romance. It is found in everything from historicals to Harlequin Presents.

Some writers can take a big misunderstanding plot and make it into a powerful, emotional drama. In the wrong hands, however, this plot can easily become absurd. The characters act like marionettes, not like real people.

What are the signs of a *silly* big misunderstanding? A crisis that could be solved with a few minutes of talking, and characters who have no logical reason to keep the information from each other.

The silly misunderstanding can be sustained only through illogical behavior with coincidences thrown in to boot. The hero walks in just in time to see some jerk manhandling the heroine. While a normal person would realize the woman was being harassed, the hero decides she must be a tramp. To make matters worse, the heroine becomes so angry with the hero for being distrustful that instead of telling him the truth, she pretends that she *was* having an affair. Oh, brother!

Let's create our own SBMP. Linda is a best-selling novelist who is traveling incognito while on vacation. Sam is a famous publisher who meets her during this vacation. Later, when Linda tells him that she is a writer, he assumes she was after him only because of his position, and he calls her every name in the book. She stalks off, upset, angry, perturbed... (She had a thesaurus in her luggage.)

This plot stinks. Why? Because the characters don't behave like real people; instead, they behave like marionettes strapped inside a bad plot.

Let's try to make it work by providing motivations. Why would a best-selling author lie about her identity? Let’s try this plot for size. Linda is an agoraphobic. She travels under an assumed identity to avoid crowds. Because she is embarrassed by her condition, she doesn’t tell Sam. Next, why would Sam be so distrustful? Maybe he recently divorced his wife after learning she married him because of his position. This plot still needs a lot of work, but at least it doesn't need a defibrillator.

How can you make a big misunderstanding plot work? Give your characters logical reasons to hide information. Don’t rely on coincidences. Most of all, don't make readers feel as though your characters acted this way only because the book had to be 250 pages long rather than 10.

Too Stupid To Live Heroines

Jennie knows outlaws are hiding in the hills surrounding the cabin. The hero has warned her against leaving the cabin until he catches the outlaws. But Jennie needs to milk the cows. Besides, she can take care of herself. So Jennie picks up her shotgun and goes outside. Only when the villain spots her does she realize... she forgot to load her gun!

What's wrong with this picture? This is exciting, isn't it? After all, Jennie is about to confront the bad guys. Surely this is suspenseful.

Except for one major thing: The suspense wasn’t created by a logical unfolding of events. It was generated because Jennie acted like a silly twit.

How can this plot be fixed? We want Jennie to confront the bad guys. Still, we don't want this confrontation coming about because she did

something inane. We need a logical reason for Jennie to go outside. Why not force her to rush outside to save her daughter? Even better, why not force that confrontation when she has to save the hero from the bad guys?

Distrustful Heroes

Some heroes act as if they should be in counseling instead of in a novel. For example, I read a romance novel about a hero who decided the heroine must be loose because she wrote sexy romance novels. He had no real evidence other than seeing her come home late a few times. It's one thing to create conflict between your main characters. It's another to make the hero act as if he's on another planet.

Heroes who are tortured by their past are often popular with readers. Heroes who are distrustful because of their past are a thing of the past. If you think you can make this kind of character succeed, however, go for it. Whatever you do, give him a background that explains his distrust.

Also, make sure the heroine's responses make sense. How would you react if your attractive neighbor decided you were a tramp simply because you were a romance writer? Right. Your heroine shouldn't grin and bear it unless you have established a good reason for her to act like a doormat.

If the characters become embroiled in distrust, their relationship shouldn't proceed as if it were normal. Eventually, they should repair their relationship, but this part shouldn't be too easy. This is an

important part of the plot and is often ignored. Don’t relegate the hero’s healing process to the final chapter.

A Final Warning

You've probably seen these mistakes in novels by best-selling authors. Don't think that gives you an excuse for getting away with them in your novels. You haven’t built a loyal readership yet.

Are we going somewhere nice?
Possible directions in Science fiction.

By Bob Billing

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This morning I was in a local bookshop in England, browsing the SF shelves. There seemed to be only three categories on display.

1) Film and TV tie-ins.
2) Classic SF first published two or more decades ago.
3) Books by Iain M. Banks.

So what's happened to good, new SF? Obviously real SF sells - the shelves were well stocked with Heinlein and Asimov. But nothing more recent. There was even a whole section devoted to Victor Gollancz's reprints of their classic titles.

Curiously, cyberpunk was almost absent. Personally I think that this is an indicator of the way the market is changing, and it's an entirely healthy direction.

Let's take a look at some of these classics, and try to get a feel for the reason for their enduring appeal. For an example let's look at Isaac Asimov's ***Foundation*** trilogy, a series which I first read in the early 70s. By modern standards the construction of the books is flawed - the first opens with three paragraphs of pure infodump, then addresses the reader directly. Next we have a few comments about a character's early life in the pluperfect tense. This sort of thing would

attract an immediate cry of "show, don't tell" on the crit circles. But in Dr. Asimov's hands it makes utterly gripping reading.

The same bookshop sells videos. I had a glance at what was on offer, and found "An Unearthly Child" and its sequel "The Daleks." These are in black and white, and were originally made by the BBC in the early 60s. They were the first episodes of what became the long-running TV series ***Dr. Who***. Yet they're still on the shelves and selling, complete with wobbly scenery, obvious rubber monsters and spectacular over-acting. It's only fair to confess that I have my own copies.

So what makes a classic? Why do some books and films stay on the shelves, and continue to sell, for years? In my opinion it comes down to two things. Firstly the classics have characters that engage the reader's sympathy. From the first page of ***Foundation*** Gaal Dornick comes across as a real person with hopes and fears, who has ambitions and makes mistakes. Similarly H Beam Piper's Jack Holloway in the ***Fuzzy*** novels (now back in print), or Anne McCaffrey's Lessa in the ***Dragonriders*** series instantly grabs the reader by the hand and leads him into the imagined world.

To my mind, it's the imagined world that is the second mark of the classics. Whatever or wherever it is, however terrifying its inhabitants, however dire the situation the protagonist must face, the imagined world of a classic is somewhere you want to go.

Read ***Dragonflight*** and you will want to leap aboard a dragon and fight threadfall. Read the ***Fuzzy*** novels and you'll start packing for a trip to Zarathustra to meet the fuzzies. Spend an evening with the ***Foundation*** trilogy and you'll begin to wonder when the next ship leaves for Trantor.

This is an experience I've never had with cyberpunk. I don't want to get into that world, and if I were there I'd be trying to get out.

This of course begs the question, "What makes an imagined world attractive?" I'd like to offer two suggestions. Firstly, the attractive worlds contain generous emotions. Lessa looks after her dragon, Jack Holloway is fond of, and protective towards, the fuzzies. Dornick cares about his mathematics.

My second suggestion is that the imagined worlds are well built. There is a sense in the books of the world being solid and going on beyond the edges of the page. This is the same quality that I find in good historical novels. Dudley Pope's books have it. Pope was a naval historian, and knew a great deal about sailing ships - so when his Captain Ramage invites you on board there's a smell of salt and tar in the air. Brian Lecomber's flying novels put you in the pilot's seat, Dick Francis can sit you on a racehorse.

However for the last decade or so this sort of thing seems to have been out of favour in SF. I've tried to read cyberpunk, but every time I've come away saying, "Is this sort of thing really necessary?" This is a warning signal to me - I don't understand the sub-genre and shouldn't criticise it. But on the other hand, if I can't enjoy reading it, why should I buy it?

And that's why I think there is hope for the future of SF. Readers have simply become tired of characters fighting like rats in endless rat-infested, decaying cities. They want something to believe in again, they want to go somewhere nice for a change, and to be with people whose hopes and fears they can share. That's why I believe that SL Viehl's ***Stardoc*** trilogy points to a brighter tomorrow. It has a very sympathetic lead, some delightful subsidiary characters and a well-drawn, attractive world. It's the sort of thing I want to read, and the sort of thing that I hope the publishers will keep putting out.

And, of course, it's the sort of thing that I try to write. But that's another story.

Stage and Screen
Robin Catesby, Associate Editor, Stage & Script

The Promise of Premise: A conversation with Bill Johnson on the craft of dramatic storytelling

by Robin Catesby

If I were to write a one-sentence premise that described Bill Johnson's career, it might be *Perseverance leads to success.* Bill's been at the screenwriting game for a long time, and now, with his new book, *A Story is a Promise* (Blue Heron Publishing, c.2000, $18.95) all that perseverance has finally paid off.

Bill Johnson got his start on this particular writer's journey when he was asked to work for an agent/story analyst reading novel manuscripts. The agent had been a student of Lajos Egri *(The Art of Dramatic Writing)* and encouraged Bill to study Egri's concept of premise: Character + Conflict = Resolution. But what Bill came to realize was that Egri's concept didn't always apply. Story is more than a main character, "It's the world of the character, it's the world that all of the characters have to operate in."

By broadening the scope to the character's world and defining the first third of a premise statement as an issue of human need, Bill ended up with an alternate equation: Dramatic Issue + Movement = Fulfillment. "A dramatic issue might be a character's need for redemption. Movement is what they have to go through to get this

redemption, like what blocks them; what helps them. And the fulfillment of the story is what this redemption looks like."

Then, after a few years of teaching premise to his screenwriting students, Bill hit upon the concept of *promise*. "For a long time I tried to teach people to identify the story's core dramatic issue," he says, "and a student walked into a class one day and said: You mean a story's promise? I said, yes yes yes!"

The story's *promise*, then, is the first third of that three-part premise statement. Think of it this way: you promise something to your audience. You promise them a story about redemption, a story about identity, a story about true love. Or, as Bill explains in his book: "A well-told story is an arrangement of words and images that re-creates life-like characters, issues, ideas and events in a way that promises dramatic fulfillment of our needs, and then delivers on that promise. A story, then, is a promise."

Over the past number of years, Bill assembled a number of essays on the subject of premise and promise into a self-published workbook which he sold at writers' workshops and on his website (www.storyispromise.com). Then, in August of 1999 at the yearly Willamette Writers conference, he pitched his collection to Blue Heron Publishing, a small independent press. The book, *A Story is a Promise*, was picked up, and published in the fall of 2000.

I met up with Bill at the Willamette Writers office while he was in-between trips out of town for workshops and book signings. One thing about Bill (and about me too): we love talking about movies. We're the kind of moviegoers who really want a film to be good. We root for it to work - for the story to play out, for the premise to reach fulfillment. I'd come with a list of prepared topics, but before I could say "how'd you get your start…" we'd launched into a discussion of the film *Pitch Black* -- a recent favorite. There's something especially rewarding about taut storytelling on a low budget, especially in a genre that's become so overblown of late with senseless big-budget extravaganzas. What made that film work, where films like *Red*

Planet and *Mission to Mars* failed, was focused storytelling and strong narrative tension that all revolved around a single issue: fear of the dark.

Before we got too carried away by eight other recent favorites (among them such wide-ranging fare as *Chicken Run* and *The Limey*), I brought our conversation back to the topic at hand: story premise.

Do you need to start with a premise, or can it develop later, through the writing process? Bill says that he's found most writers start with some core issue -- some idea of what interests them about the story's world. "And usually I can dig out of them what that issue is. But to start a story with a sense of a story's premise is to start a story with a sense of purpose, with a sense of direction. Now, it's true also that some people need to write a novel or a screenplay to see what it's about, but that means that they can then create a premise and go back and revise the story to that design. And when you have that kind of dramatic purpose to the story that begins with the opening, it communicates to the audience that as a storyteller, you're taking the audience on a journey and you understand the journey; you understand how to create the journey. Otherwise what people end up with are openings that are the absolute weakest writing because it's the most unfocused and unclear about a sense of purpose or direction.

"Premise is like a carpenter's level. Is the foundation of the story level? Is it there? Does it work? Is it cracked? That's what a premise is for. It's so someone can go back and see if the story is advancing in a way that creates a sense of purpose to the audience."

To understand premise, it's important to understand the difference between *story* and *plot.* I learned this one the hard way. The first time *I* attempted to write a film script it was all plot and no story. Sure, lots of entertaining and mildly suspenseful things happened to my characters, but what did it all add up to? What was the underlying

story? I'd never asked myself that question because at the time, I'd no idea there was a difference. Plot is indeed not the same thing as story, and a premise isn't likely to exist at all if there's no story to play it out.

Plot is the sequence of events. If you're writing a plot summary, it could consist of "and then he does this, and then he does this" and so on. The *story*, however, is defined by the premise and by the arcs of the lead characters. If a hero has no arc -- no promise, no conflict, no fulfillment that describes a greater theme of human need -- then there is no story, only plot. This seemed confusing at first to me, but the more I watched films and searched for story, the easier it was to discover when one was present and when one wasn't.

The 1986 action thriller *Die Hard* is a film that Bill uses frequently in his classes and workshops as an example of a strong storyline underlying an action-packed plot.

On the surface, *Die Hard* is about a New York cop trapped in a building full of terrorists. That's the *plot*, but the *story* is much more than that. We learn this from the very opening of the film:

"When we're introduced to McClane, he's clinging desperately to the seat of a plane because he's afraid of flying, and the reason that works so well is because *if* he's afraid of flying and he's flying --"

"Obviously he has a compelling reason to fly," I offer.

Bill nods and continues, " And the compelling reason to fly is that he's trying to reconcile with his wife. So you see how just this little situation begins this process of narrative tension. If it's so important to him, it starts to pull on us. When he gets to where his wife is, he can't find her name because she's taken back her old name. So it's not only that he's trying to reconcile with his wife, but also that she is

actively withdrawing from the marriage. So that's how you introduce what the *story's* about."

All this, and the terrorists haven't even shown up yet. So what then is the promise of *Die Hard?* What's the story about? Not the terrorists. No, it's reconciliation. McClane's need to reconcile with his wife. "Again it's that deeper issue," Bill says, "Everything McClane does revolves around that. And what's interesting in *Die Hard* is, if the terrorists don't show up he doesn't get back together with his wife. The terrorists become the device through which he comes to understand just how much he loves her and she comes to understand just how much she loves him. So even though *Die Hard* has tons of action, at its heart it's this story about this man who wants to reconcile with his wife, and the audience recognizes that and pulls it in."

So how do we get from this analysis of *Die Hard's* story to a premise sentence? We can get there by looking at the story question. A "story question" might be defined as the question brought up by the promise, or core dramatic issue. In *Die Hard,* the issue is McClane's need to reconcile with his wife. The question then is "Will McClane and his wife reconcile?" The story movement -- the middle part of the premise -- throws obstacles in the path of this reconciliation, namely, the terrorists. The movement creates adversity that McClane must face. As the adversity increases, so must McClane's courage. The fulfillment of the story then is the ultimate reconciliation: the renewal of their love. So, to sum it up in a three-part premise statement: *Courage to face adversity leads to renewal.*

But what happens if there is no premise? What if a film is all plot and no story? "When you get to *Die Hard 3*," Bill says, "you have the bad guy (Jeremy Irons) who is the brother of the bad guy in the first film and you think he's doing all this stuff to torment McClane because he killed his brother. And then at some point somebody asks him, well is that why you're doing all this? And he says, oh, no, I don't really care that my brother died. They undercut the one thing that would have given the script a compelling story."

Instead, *Die Hard 3* with its huge action set pieces, careening cabs and exploding subway cars, came off as a generic action buddy pic but with McClane plunked down in the middle, completely out of place. In fact, that's exactly what it was; an adaptation of a script titled *Simple Simon* that had nothing to do with the *Die Hard* series. Thus, no character arc for the lead, no issue of human need, no wife to rescue. No story at all, just plot.

"So the problem with having plot events that don't evoke states of feeling," Bill says, " -- which is a basic problem I see in a lot of writing; things happen but no one feels anything about it -- is it doesn't allow the audience to feel, to share the journey. And that comes back to that issue of narrative tension. If you can evoke what a journey feels like through a character, in a way that's accessible so the audience internalizes it, then the audience feels caught up in that world. Then they have to go to the end because they have to know how it's going to turn out. They've become invested. And that's the number one job of a storyteller, starting with the first sentence of a story. It's how do you get your audience invested."

Bill had touched on the term narrative tension a few times in our conversation, so I thought I'd ask him to define it and describe how it fits into the concept of premise.

"Narrative tension increases when a character can't go forward and can't go back. In *Romeo & Juliet,* Romeo has to act on his feelings of his love for Juliet. But to act on his feelings is to betray his clan. That's narrative tension. But if Romeo says 'I'm in love with Juliet' and everyone says 'ok that's great, the feud's over,' then… I know it sounds silly, but I read a lot of scripts where a character says 'I have a problem, I need something,' and somebody says 'OK here it is.' So, the writer comes up with this series of problems, but there's always a series of simple solutions."

I immediately think of the old tree and rocks definition of dramatic writing and toss that his way. Force your character up a tree and throw rocks at him. The bigger the rocks, the greater the narrative tension. Ideally, it should take the entire story before the character can figure out how to dodge the rocks and get down from the tree.

I'd always thought a tree was just a tree, but Bill adds another layer onto this analogy: "So in terms of how I work with storytelling: What does the tree represent? Does it represent courage? Does it represent renewal? If they get down from the tree will they understand who they are? So the tree itself has to represent something.

"The other part of narrative tension -- and this is the real heart of storytelling -- is transferring the tension over, whether that character gets down from the tree, to the audience. And you do that because whatever is keeping that character up the tree -- whether it's wrestling with an issue of redemption or renewal -- is something the audience both identifies with and internalizes. And once the audience internalizes this tension, then they have to go to the end of the road for the relief of the tension the story's generated in them. So it's the job of the storyteller to generate that narrative tension absolutely as quickly as they possibly can, because at that point the audience needs the story for the relief it offers."

It's now beginning to come together, like a well-constructed fortress. The promise, or core dramatic idea, poses a question of human need, then launches the audience into a dramatic situation that has immediate unresolved narrative tension. The tension continues through the story movement; in fact, it just won't let up until the end, until that final moment of fulfillment when the last terrorist is dead and McClane and his wife can snuggle into the back seat of Argyle's limo.

So, how do you know if your premise will work? I ask Bill for a few bad examples so we can learn what not to do.

“Here’s an example of a bad premise, and this is what I would call a moral,” he says, flipping to a new page in his workbook. “*History creates change*. Now if you change that to *war leads to senseless destruction*, you see now we have a sense of what this story is about. What are the characters going to be caught up in and what’s the fulfillment of the story? That it leads to destruction. So it could lead to the destruction of a character, it could lead to the destruction of community.”

“*History creates change* doesn’t suggest any impact on a specific person,” I add, imagining one dull documentary as a result of that bad premise.

“It’s so general, yes,” Bill says. “Another example of a bad premise is *love is its own reward.* I mean it’s nice for a fortune cookie, but it doesn’t suggest movement. It doesn’t suggest that you’re going somewhere. So, if you want to do another one about war you can say *the destruction of war leads to rebirth*. So you can have a story where people get caught up in war but it leads to rebirth.”

I tell Bill that I often try to figure out the premise of a film I’ve just seen, just to see if I can. It’s good practice -- a good exercise for a writer because then I can go home, think about it, and say “Okay, now I see how they put all the meat on the bones and made it work.”

“Right,” Bill echoes. “Because otherwise you’ve got a pile of bones and a pile of meat, and how do you get it into something that looks like a dinosaur?”

So, in my attempt to build, or at least interpret dinosaurs, I decide to present Bill with a couple of premises I’d guessed to see if I’d come close.

My first choice, *Gladiator.* The premise: *Courage to face death leads to renewal*. Here is the story of Maximus, a man who has lost everything. Yet, no matter what hardship he faces, he knows his ultimate goal is to return home. In the end, the only way he's able to accomplish this is by facing death, not only in the arena, but he must also face the man who has caused death all around him and he must face his own death. Ultimately, to find his own renewal, he must die so that he can reunite with his wife and son in the afterlife.

"With his family, you're right," Bill agrees. "It's the only way home." We talk further about how effectively the premise was woven throughout the film, even from the opening shot of Maximus walking through the wheat fields. "And that's an example," Bill adds, "where if you understand the premise, you understand how all these elements work together. How they have a purpose in the story."

The second film I picked was a tough one: *The Matrix*. I went back and forth on a premise for this, but finally settled on *Self-realization leads to transcendence*. I know that sounds a little odd for a film with the line "we need guns, lots of guns," but underlying the action, beneath the "plot" of the film, is this incredible, almost Buddhist theme of transcendence.

"I'd make it a little more specific," Bill says in response to my premise statement. "It's about one man waking up who wakes up humanity. So I would almost name the transcendence. And that's why it starts with the message on the computer screen saying basically 'wake up.' And that's what I love about the *Sixth Sense* and *Unbreakable* and *The Matrix* is that they are all about waking up."

Before we launch into a discussion of the brilliance of M. Night Shyamalan, I ask, "So how would you redefine *The Matrix's* premise in a single sentence?"

"*One man's struggle to wake up leads to the awakening of humanity*."

Cool, I think. I want to write a film with a premise like that. First though, we have to rave about the magic of *The Sixth Sense* and *Unbreakable* for another half-hour. But I'll save that conversation for Part Two.

"One last thing about premise," Bill says before I shut off the mini-recorder, "Premise is like a brick. It's not meant to be creative, original, artistic, clever. It's like this is the foundation of the story and in a sense the audience isn't going to see it -- it simply supports what the audience does see. So it's not about being clever or original, or one of a kind. This is a story about redemption, this is a story about renewal, this is a story about identity."

Two hours later, Bill's on the road again, this time heading up to Seattle for another workshop/book signing, and I'm thinking about the premise for the next chapter of my writing life. I like the one I picked for him: *Perseverance leads to success.* I think I'll try it out.

Bill Johnson's book, *A Story is a Promise,* is available through his website (*www.storyispromise.com*) and through various on-line retailers, including Borders, Barnes & Noble, and Amazon.com.

Shane P. Carr, Associate Editor, Suspense & Mystery

Unleashing the Dark Side
The Motives of Villains and Heroes in Suspense Fiction

By Shane P. Carr

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Have you ever wondered how a suspense writer brings his or her characters to life in such a way that the characters cannot help but send chills down the reader's spine? Did you ever wonder what the author's mind must be like to think up such a twisted, sadistic character? Would you believe me if I told you that it was the character's humanity that really sends those chills down your spine? Yes, believe it or not, it is the human side of such characters that make the hairs of your neck stand on end.

Let's take Tom Harris's Hannibal 'The Cannibal' Lecter for example. Do you really think Dr. Lecter would have been nearly as terrifying if he didn't have such passion for Agent Starling? Think about it. Imagine Lecter instead as a ten-foot flesh-eating monster that did not resemble a human in anyway. I'll be the first to admit a flesh-eating monster can be scary, but it wouldn't have unnerved you on that inner psychological level. If you let yourself think about it for a minute, you will realize that it is the fact that Lecter is human and responsible for such atrocities that is really unnerving you. The fact that Hannibal Lecter could be your everyday physician or the neighborhood mailman is what really makes people terrified of him. In ***Silence of the Lambs*** the author makes readers see the dark side of humanity, that inner evil that has the potential to manifest itself in each and every one of us.

This potential for inner evil is what all suspense writers should focus on when creating their villain. After all, it is the manifestation of this dark side of humanity that becomes the basis for your entire story. Now, this doesn't mean that your villain has to be a flesh-eating serial killer with a taste for fine wine and art. The villain can be an anti-hero like a parent who has lost a child to drunk driver. The loss of the child could be what manifests the character's dark side. The character could then become obsessed with avenging the child. Perhaps the character (let's call her Carol) begins hanging out at bars watching which individuals drive after drinking. Carol then follows them home. As they step out of the car she runs them down and kills them. Now, some readers will sympathize with Carol. Others will see her as having a screw loose. Either way, the author has made a suspenseful character. Carol is very human, yet the tragedy involving her child has manifested her dark side and driven her to kill. The fact that Carol, an average mother who has never harmed a fly, could become a killer is what will scare the reader. Readers will relate to Carol, yet they won't like the fact that they do.

Carol is just one example and a far cry from Dr. Lecter. Yet what if I told you that, as a child, Hannibal Lecter lived on a farm. What if young Hannibal had a lamb on the farm that he considered a pet? Hannibal wakes one morning to feed his lamb, only to find a farmhand slaughtering it for the market. Hannibal's father tells him the lamb will be used for food. The death of the lamb triggers that dark side within Hannibal. He soon rationalizes that instead of eating other animals it would be better to eat his own kind. Heck, from the animal's point of view I'm sure it seems like a good idea.

Now we see Hannibal 'The Cannibal' as a tragic character that was scarred by the loss of a pet. Suddenly Hannibal is not all that unlike Carol. Each has suffered a traumatic loss, and in their minds they are bringing justice to the situation.

When creating a suspense villain, the writer must look into the motivation of the character. The writer must develop the villain as human first. He must understand what his villain's life was like before

the dark side manifested. The writer then must figure out what leads to the manifestation. Once this is done, the writer can begin writing about this character and his dark manifestation.

In most suspense stories, the villain’s motive is not revealed until the climax of the story, yet the writer must know what that motive is before writing the first word. The villain’s motive will help drive the story. The writer can reveal clues along the way and help the reader draw his or her own conclusion as to why the villain is doing such things.

This is where the writer can play with the reader’s mind. As the writer builds his cast of characters, he can create other characters that may also have a motive for committing the crime. This will keep readers guessing as to who the real villain is. This of course adds suspense, to the story and that is really what suspense writers are shooting for. So far we know we must have a normal human side of our villain so we can get our readers to relate to him. We must have a motive that manifests the dark side within the villain. Finally we must know that motive before we begin to write. Accomplishing all of these things will bring the character to life and give him greater depth.

Since we now have a villain, we of course need a hero. In suspense fiction the hero is usually a police officer or private detective investigating the case. There are other professions that work just as well; for example, Patricia Cornwell’s Kay Scarpetta is a forensics pathologist. Use whatever works for you. The hero is, for the most part, on the side of the law, seeking out the dark manifestation in order to halt its actions.

The hero's views will usually oppose the villain's, although you will sometimes find that the hero will relate to the villain's human side, especially in the case of Carol, which we discussed earlier.
You should have your hero’s motivations in mind before writing, as well. Now, on the simplistic level this could be: Tim became a cop to

fight crime. Yet if you want the character to become three-dimensional, you must give him more of a life.

Suppose Tim became a cop because his father was a cop. Perhaps his father was killed by a serial killer that he was investigating at the time. The serial killer was never caught. Six years later the killings start again. Tim has since become a cop like his father. Fate finds Tim on the trail of the same killer who murdered his father.

See how we are adding depth to the hero. We now have a background on Tim. We have Tim's motivation for being a cop. We also have something else . . . we have the potential for a dark side to manifest in Tim. What happens as Tim pursues the serial killer and eventually confronts him? Does the dark side manifest in Tim seeking vengeance for his father's death or does Tim's motivation to honor his father, by being a good cop, cause Tim to arrest the killer and bring him to justice?

See how we now have two characters on opposite sides; the suspense builds, and the story climaxes with the confrontation of these two characters. Situations like this will keep your readers glued to the page in hopes of seeing the outcome. Yet none of it works unless you know your two characters and their motives. You, as the writer, must get inside each character's head and fully realize what is driving the characters in their actions. If you can do this, the plot for your story should begin to develop quite easily. You'll then be on your way to creating a nail-biting story that can get under your reader's skin.

To help you along, I offer a simple exercise. Watch your favorite movie or reread your favorite novel. While doing so, examine the hero and the villain. Write down each character's motives. Then write down the things that make you relate to the character. Think about the villain's motive and what lead up to it. If you were in a similar situation, could a dark side like this manifest in yourself? Could you become this villain?

On the other side, think of the hero. What drives him or her? How easily could this 'hero' manifest a dark side to stop the villain? Are the hero and villain alike in any way? Do they share a common trait? When you're finished, try developing some characters of your own. Develop some motives for the villain and hero. Let the dark side manifest from the villain and drive him toward his goal. Do a similar exercise with the hero. Give the hero the temptation of the dark side. See what kind of plot you come up with. I think you'll be surprised.

> The initial reaction that a story *must* elicit from the reader is empathy -- the vicarious experiencing of the feelings, thoughts, and attitudes of another person. The first person with whom the reader should have empathy is the novel's lead character the protagonist.
>
> Dean Koontz
> *How to Write Tales of Horror, Fantasy & Science Fiction* (Chapter 17)
> Edited by J.N. Williamson
> Writer's Digest Books
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Young Adult & Children
Justin Stanchfield, Associate Editor, Young Adult & Children's Fiction

The Gulf

By Justin Stanchfield

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Not too many sure things in this world. Death, probably. Taxes most likely. Beyond that, it's pretty much up for grabs. But, one thing I can say, with absolute certainty, is that each and every one of us was, at some point, born, and that one way or another we managed to grow up. Some of us grow up faster, some of us slower. (I intend to grow up any day now. Really, I do.) But all of us, every man, woman and child, can look back across that gulf that separates our now from our then, and say, "Yeah, I've been there."

This ability to look back, to draw on our own past, is one of the most powerful weapons in any writers arsenal. Especially if you want to write for kids. It is the ultimate example of 'write what you know," this ability to mine our own childhoods for characters and stories. It is one of our strongest allies.

And, it can also be, if you're not careful, your worst enemy.

Writing is a very personal experience. We create imaginary worlds, trying all the while to make every actor in our little dramas as real as we possibly can. Yet, for all that our characters sometimes take center stage and seem to act on their own volition, they are, in the end, extensions of our own imaginations. It can't be helped. And while this makes for wonderful, vivid characters, it also means our

pasts have a tendency to intrude into our stories. And when you're writing about people younger than yourself, the temptation to simply recreate your own childhood can be incredibly seductive.

This isn't necessarily a bad thing. But it does create its own set of problems. Think back on how difficult it was for you to understand grown-ups when you were in grade school. Try to remember how far apart your opinions were from your parent's when you were in your teens. The basic equipment doesn't change much from generation to generation. Kids are still kids, but the backdrop to their world and ours can be as different as night to day. Even if you're just out of high school, or maybe haven't even graduated yet, take a look at the where you were just a few years ago and see how much things have changed since then. It can be a staggering revelation.

Some writers avoid the problem by setting their stories in different eras. This is fine, *as long as the writer creates a believable world for their characters to play in*. No matter how exotic the locale, it's not enough to just plop a copy of yourself down on the page and pretend the backdrop doesn't matter. A girl from eighth century France is going to react differently than a twenty-third century teenager living on a colony orbiting Neptune. And both will, without a doubt, see the world differently than you did at their age. Wherever you set your story, let your characters be consistent with the times, even if those times exist nowhere but in your own imagination. The same advice applies if you are writing about kids growing up in the 60's or 70's. Every generation faces the same troubles in different ways. Don't cheat your readers by pretending they didn't.

Observation is such an integral part of what we do that most of us take it for granted. Writers are, by nature, curious people. Okay, were a bunch of nosy busybodies. But beware the temptation to simply observe kids at play, or eavesdrop at a mall, and put down verbatim what you heard on paper. This can be a problem for two very important reasons, one subtle, one not. Trying to create realistic characters by giving them borrowed lines is all too often about as convincing as a middle-aged man in a convertible struggling to keep

his toupee from blowing off. If you're going to observe, and by all means, do observe, look deep. Don't pay attention to what kids say as much as how they treat each other. Think like a detective. Look for the motives behind the actions. Listen to what kids say, not how they say it.

The other reason to be wary of overheard expressions is that they so quickly becomes dated. Slang is too mercurial for anyone to keep pace with. What is current in one area probably is already passé in an other. And if you're making up your own jargon, especially if your making up your own, please don't substitute one word for another. "Icy, guy" for "cool, dude" is nothing more than calling a rabbit a smerp.

The same applies to fashion trends and music. I once dropped the name of a number-one band into a story thinking it would add that little extra touch of realism. It did. Unfortunately, by the time I managed to sell the story a few months later, the band had not only fallen off the charts, they had broken up, sued each other, and their lead singer had committed suicide. And if the story had ever made it into print, (the magazine folded with nary a peep) the reference to the band would have placed what was supposed to have been a cutting edge, young adult techno- thriller, almost two years in the past. Not a good place to be.

So, what's a poor writer to do?

Easy. Think like a kid. Look back at what you wanted when you were ten, or twelve, or seventeen. What scared you? What embarrassed you? What was the one thing you were just sure you couldn't live without. Earlier I said don't just mine your own experiences. Instead, mine your emotions. Try to see your story through your character's eyes as you would have seen them at that age. And remember one thing above all else. No matter how silly we may, as adults, look back at ourselves as children, at the time the crisis was utterly, completely and irrevocably vital. People have deep thoughts and passions no

matter what age they might be. All that changes is what we're passionate about. Being stood up at a ninth grade dance is every bit as traumatic to a fifteen year-old as losing a job is to a forty year-old. Both situations are survivable, though at the time it doesn't seem like it. And just because you may never have been swept up in a religious fervor, or have been carried away in a surge of nationalism, don't pretend that the people in your stories wouldn't have been. Those children who marched off to die in the Crusades believed, to the very bottom of their souls, in what they were doing.

Maybe what it comes down to is giving your characters a little growing room. Don't arbitrarily force them to behave one way just because that's how you did it when you were their age. After all, you didn't like to eat your Brussel sprouts. Why should they?

Five Practical Tips for Young Writers

by Beth Adele Long

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You're in school---maybe junior high, maybe high school. You love to read, you're discovering that you also love to write, and at some point you've thought to yourself, "Writing is something I might like to do for real." Career planning is on your mind, so you start to wonder: could I someday be a writer---and get paid for it?

If you're like me, the idea of getting paid to think up wild stories and write them down is almost too good to be true. But when you're young, it can be hard to know how to go about becoming "A Fiction Writer." Should you go to college? If so, what should you major in? English literature? Creative writing? Something else? And what about money? It's not as if the publishers put out ads in the paper: *Opening for entry-level novelist, $35,000 plus benefits, opportunity for advancement. No experience required.* You can't just announce you're a writer and expect the cash to flow in.

So what *can* you do?

A huge part of what you can do is simply apply yourself to learning the craft of writing. The rest of _Vision_, as well as numerous other writing resources, can help you with that goal, and I'll look closer at those issues in future columns. But you also have think about practical issues, like where to go for college and what kind of job to get while you're waiting for those novel contracts. How you handle

these practical issues will be unique to your situation and talents, but here are some tips to help you chart a course toward being a successful (and financially solvent) writer.

Tip #1: Plan a second career. You will not earn enough to support yourself (let alone a family, if you have one) from your writing alone, not for a long time. You won't. Repeat this to yourself again and again, until you firmly believe it.

"There is the tendency," Kathleen Ann Goonan says, "for the individual to think, 'Yeah, but I can quit my job, write full time, and make money soon because I'm better than everyone else.'" Does this sound familiar? It sure does to me! Not too long ago I expressed that exact sentiment to a friend. Then I started talking to people in the industry, and following publishing news, and my perspective changed. Let me tell you why.

Even if your first novel sells---which it most likely will not---and you go on to sell more novels immediately, it will still take a while before your writing earns enough that you can live on it. It's fair to say that most successful novelists in the science fiction and fantasy genres take at least ten years from the time they sell their first novel to the time they're able to support themselves (with a modest income) from their writing. (Note that I said "successful"; I'm not even including people who slog it out for years and *never* get a big break.) For many people it takes longer. You have to start thinking now about how you want to support yourself in the meantime.

I admit, some writers have been able to write full time early on because their spouse is willing and able to support their writing habit. Novelists like Sean Stewart and Kathleen Ann Goonan come to mind, among others. But please don't count on this; you'll be fortunate if it works out, but you'd be foolish to assume it will happen. (And please don't pick your spouse based on whether they'll support your writing! "I'm sorry, I can't marry you; you don't make enough money for me to stay at home and write." Horrors!)

Even for people with supportive spouses, it's not easy to reach financial independence. Thanks to his wife's support, Sean Stewart has been able to write full time for most of the years he's been writing novels. It's now been eight years since his first novel sale (thirteen since his first submission), and he says it's "unclear at this time" whether he could support his family from his writing alone. That's with seven successful novels published. Kathleen Ann Goonan has been writing full time, supported by her husband, since 1987; that was two years after writing her first novel, which never sold. She finally made her first novel sale seven years ago, and since then has published three more well-received novels in addition to about twenty short stories and novellas. At this point, she says she would be able to support herself by her writing "if I lived very frugally, had no spouse or children, and wrote constantly."

Both Stewart's and Goonan's novels have been nominated for and/or won major awards; both receive impressive critical acclaim for their work. And they *still* can barely, if at all, support themselves comfortably based on writing income alone. Do you see the picture I'm painting here? It's a tough industry.

Having rained on your parade for this long, let me point out that it's not impossible to have financial success as a writer. Obviously, people do succeed. Not as obvious is precisely *why* people succeed; I wish I could tell you the Big Secret to Financial Success, but there just isn't one. Some people achieve it, a lot of people don't. I don't want to tell you that you can't reach that dream of being a "full-time writer." But I do want to prepare you for a long, tough road that is anything but predictable.

And don't forget to look at the bright side of this whole "day job" business. Goonan points out, "I think that life in the 'real world' is essential to developing the broad background a writer needs to have in order to accomplish work that has that sometimes elusive 'verisimilitude.'" A day job does not have to be a heavy burden while you're waiting for publishers to recognize your genius. If you have the

right attitude, it's just more grist for the mill. It will equip you to be an even better writer.

So we've established that you'll need a day job. What should you think about when you're deciding on that job?

Tip #2: Find a career you enjoy. Your first criterion for your "other" career should not be "Allows me to make $150,000 annually." Money is important, don't get me wrong; think carefully about what kind of job will let you support yourself adequately. But money isn't the most important thing. If you're going to be in a career for ten or twenty or forty years, and you want to have the energy to write scintillating prose at the same time, then make it a high priority to find a career that excites you.

A lot of young writers wonder if the best college major would be English Literature, or Creative Writing. These are certainly options, but don't rule out other possibilities. One of the great things about being a writer is that everything is useful! Nothing you learn is wasted, and that can be very freeing.

So should you go to college? Maybe. In today's economy, probably. If the career that you want to pursue requires a degree---or if you're not sure what you want to do, and you want to be exposed to all the possibilities---then certainly go for a degree.

But suppose you're interested in something that doesn't require a university degree---like interior design, where you only need a certification in order to get your start. Don't be fooled into thinking that you somehow "need" a degree to be a good writer. Many successful writers didn't get a college degree, and it didn't seem to hold them back at all. One of those writers is named Holly Lisle. (For her take on college and writing, read *Experts, Professionals, and College*.)

Do what's right for *you*.

Tip #3: Find a career that will leave you time to write. If you want to be able to devote yourself to writing outside of your day job, keep in mind that certain careers will take more of your time than others. Perhaps you're interested in medicine---but being an emergency room doctor would not give you the kind of time you'll want to develop your writing career. Be realistic and practical when you consider your career choices, and try to find something that will let you handle "real life" and still have time and energy left for writing.

Of course, if the *only* career aside from writing that really excites you is emergency room doctor---or a similarly time-consuming job---then go for it. But be aware that your dream of success in writing will probably take a lot longer to realize.

Tip #4: Stay out of debt. Those four words might not mean a whole lot right now, but believe me, when you're spending as much each month to pay off school loans, car loans, *whatever* loans as you pay in rent and food, "stay out of debt" will mean a lot. Debts will follow you wherever you go, they will tie you down, and they will limit your ability to take risks. If writing is a goal for you, then debt will be one of your most unyielding obstacles.

Avoid it when you can. When you can't avoid it, make it as small as possible. Your future self will be unspeakably grateful if you do.

Tip #5: "To thine own self be true." Listen to Sean Stewart: "In my opinion you owe it to yourself to write the most important and urgent and heartfelt and personal books you can, even when staring directly at the facts of the marketplace."

With all this talk of money and jobs and debt and whatnot, it might be easy to lose sight of the real purpose of writing. But if you forget why

you're writing in the first place, then everything else is less than worthless.

Financial success is not the measure of your success *as a writer.* Financial success means you've found a niche in the market, but it doesn't necessarily mean you've found a niche in people's minds and hearts. If you have the need and the will and the determination to write the stories that really matter, then you know what the real point is, and you'll push on despite the tough realities of the publishing industry.

Telling those stories is what makes it worth holding down a full-time job, maybe one that doesn't thrill you, and spending your evenings and weekends hunched over the keyboard, agonizing over the inadequacy of your words and pushing forward anyway. Don't let this other stuff make you forget that.

If you are determined to someday be a full-time writer, earning enough from your writing alone to support you (and your family), then remind yourself daily that you're in it for the long haul. It will take a lot of time, effort, and sheer determination to reach your goal, and you'll have to make a lot of sacrifices on the way.

Realize that many top-notch writers reach the level of "professional" writer without making a full career of it. Many writers are also teachers, and they do their writing during summers and on days they don't have classes. Many writers reach some level of success in their writing and go part-time with their other job, working as consultants or the like. Some writers *could* support themselves from their writing alone, but choose to continue working another job as well, because they value the experience. The possibilities abound.

Whatever you do, remember that these are only guidelines. There are no quick and easy solutions to sticky issues like these. It will take a

lot of thinking on your part, a lot of advice from people you know and trust, and a lot of patience to make your dreams reality.

But if you succeed, it will all be worth it.

(Thanks to *Sean Stewart* and *Kathleen Ann Goonan* for providing pages and pages of helpful material.)

'On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft' by Stephen King

Shane P. Carr

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Welcome to Holly Lisle's ***Vision*** Book Reviews. It is here that you, the aspiring author, will come to find the latest and best books on writing technique, genre writing, and manuscript submission, as well as author memoirs and other books for writers.

This month we are proud to bring you a review of a book that gives an honest, heartfelt look into the life of a writer, from his impoverished start to his phenomenal bestseller status. The book is ***On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*** by Stephen King.

I have been a fan of Mr. King's for quite some time and found he is an author who has the gift of mesmerizing his readers. When I found out he was writing a book on his writing techniques compiled with a memoir on his life as a writer, I was salivating with anticipation. Now, some readers may be quick to discard Stephen King as a horror writer but if they would only take a look at his full body of work they would surely be impressed. 'On Writing' gives you a look into how this best-selling author defied the odds and overcame poverty, alcohol abuse, rejection, and heartache to achieve his present status.

The book opens with King's childhood and thirst for reading and writing. It offers a look at King's earliest attempts of crafting fiction on notebook paper, stapling it together and selling it to friends and relatives. King reveals his relationship with his mother and a horrifying yet humorous trip to the dentist as well as the things that scared him as a child. We see how his relationships with family and

friends influenced his work and gave him a rich tapestry for creating his characters in later novels.

Readers watch as Mr. King takes form as an author. We learn how he dealt with his first rejection notice, as well as how he made use of advice given to him by mentors and rivals. We watch as King loses his job, only to come home and find a letter stating a publisher wishes to buy his novel ***Carrie***. We share the joy of the first real sale and how the first advance is spent (on overdue bills and food). We share King's excitement of learning he has reached bestseller status for the first time.

Later we watch as King falls prey to the demons of alcoholism and battles the odds with the support of his wife. Mr. King opens his soul to his readers in a brutally honest look at a writer's life and the hurdles that can easily become pitfalls for aspiring writers or, with dedication and hard work, can be overcome.

In the second section of the book, aptly called 'The Toolbox,' readers get advice on writing techniques and grammar usage. King gives the Do's and Don'ts of fiction writing and explains what techniques work and why. He offers readers first draft samples of some of his work so readers can see that even best selling authors start out with mistakes and need revisions. He discusses what to expect from agents and publishers as well as how to increase your chances at publication. King then offers a few exercises for readers to try.

The book closes with a first-hand account of the accident Mr. King was involved in last year, in which he was struck by a vehicle and injured badly. Opening himself to the readers, he reveals the thoughts and feelings that went through his mind at that time. Combining humor and some strong emotion, King shows a side of himself that few of his readers have ever seen. We get a detailed account of King's road to recovery, his battle with his own fears, and a struggle to overcome writer's block. King also hints at what his readers should

expect next from him as a writer and what he, as an author, looks forward to.

I'd recommend that, if you are a fan of Stephen King or and aspiring fiction writer, you read 'On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft'. It is one of the few books that will give you that inside look at a writer's life and the hurdles that must be overcome.

'On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft' By Stephen King

Publisher: Scribner ISBN: 0-684-85352-3

Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America, Inc

Lazette Gifford, E-publishing Moderator

Since storytelling began, writers have searched for ways to better express their imaginations and to reach the widest audiences. Today, help with those problems can be found in a medium that is more substantial, but nearly as ephemeral, as the wind.

It's the World Wide Web. People who are serious about publication often spend considerable time looking for material on how to properly write, format and submit material. The Web has a plethora of sites containing pertinent information, but how reliable is the material once you find it?

Consider the Source

While "considering the source" is not always the best way to judge material on the web, one site that undoubtedly can be trusted is the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America, Inc. (SFWA) page. You may have thought SFWA is an organization representing only published writers; however *http://www.sfwa.org* has articles aimed at beginners, the newly published, and the seasoned professional. You do not have to be a member of SFWA to access most of this information. The articles on these pages cover the issues of writing and publishing, with essays ranging from common mistakes in grammar and point of view, to manuscript preparation and finding an agent.

Covering “The Craft” and “The Business”

Writing is an art, and for those who wish to be published, it is also a business. The SFWA site acknowledges the importance of both aspects. From the splash page, the first link dealing with the craft leads to a nexus of fifty separate links. You will even find (under External Links to More Articles About Writing *http://www.sfwa.org/writing/ex_writing.htm* Forward Motion Writer's Community. These links in craft are divided into 'The Basics, Intermediate, and Advanced."

Under the business section there is information on all kinds of contracts, including electronic rights. Learning to recognize a good contract and to know what clauses to avoid can save a new writer trouble over rights.

SFWA also has an important 'Writer Beware' section that deals with scams upcoming writers might face.

Information from Professionals

Browsing through the files on the SFWA site, you can take lessons from the masters of the SF and fantasy genre. The articles found on this single web site will bring you the earned wisdom of professionals such as C.J. Cherryh, Poul Anderson and Elizabeth Moon, each taking the time to help prospective writers improve their stories. There is even an article called "Writing SF for Kids" by Justin Stanchfield, the Young Adult and Children's Moderator at the Forward Motion Writer's Community.

Need some pointers on the basics? Beginners can choose essays from seasoned writers Melisa Michaels, Roger MacBride Allen, and

many others. These articles don't just explain, they show the reader examples of what to avoid when writing. Other articles reach beyond the basics to give tips on plot development, character creation and choices in Points of view, and many other issues of style.

Knowledge Base

There are millions of words posted on the art of writing on the World Wide Web. Every search engine will bring up numerous entries for any query about writing. The knowledge base available from SFWA makes *http://www.sfwa.org* a natural launching pad for those writers who search the web for the keys to excellence in writing.

Forward Motion
Jim Mills, Associate Editor, Forward Motion Community

What are Crit Circles?

By Jim Mills

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For that matter, what is HollyLisle.com all about? To quote Holly, "We have ... a private readers' and writers' community that gives you access to places to write and critique fiction, meet other writers, and get your writing career on track, ... and just hang out and have fun with other people who like books, reading, writing, fantasy, and long debates on an amazing variety of subjects."

(You can find the entire text and lots of good general info at http://hollylisle.com/community/)

Sound interesting? One of the key activities in developing a career as a writer is finding a place to write and critique fiction. Why? So that you can get critical feedback from other writers who will tell you what you're doing right, and how to improve. It's a learning process. Like any other career, there are things you need to learn. The crit circles help you along the way, both with critiques and general knowledge. Ask a question, and you will often receive multiple answers.

The Master index list for Crit Circles can be found on the Crit Circle Classifieds Board (http://network54.com/Hide/Forum/70404) in a message labeled "Crit Circle Master Index - Look Here First." That is exactly what you should do if you are interested in finding a circle to join.

Look at the board postings and visit the circles you're interested in. Read a story or two along with the posted critiques. This will give you a good idea if the circle is a fit for you. If it is, then contact the crit circle moderator about joining. Some moderators prefer you post such a message on the CCC Board, and some directly in the circle itself. If in doubt, email the moderator -- his or her email is posted in the CCC Board master list.

Here is a quick recap of how to join a Crit Circle. It's easy!

1. Write and edit a story or chapter to the best of your ability.
2. Find a crit circle you like the look of (and that will be a good fit for your type of writing). The Crit Circle Classifieds Board is the best place to look.
3. Ask the Circle moderator for permission to join the circle.
4. Critique stories already present in the circle. Critiquing is an important part of learning to write.
5. Post your story or chapter as a "message" in a crit circle.
6. Get feedback from other writers.
7. Edit and improve your work.
8. Repeat steps 4 and after. Learn. Pretty soon, you may be selling, too. Never give up.

Dive right in -- the water's fine.

I hope this helps you out. Feel free to contact me with questions or suggestions about the list. Post them on the CCC Board or email *Jim@HollyLisle.com*

Thanks, keep writing, and good luck!

Jim Mills, Crit Circle Classifieds Moderator (one of many hats)

> Groups offer, at their best, mutual encouragement, amicable competition, Stimulating discussion, practice in criticism, and support in difficulty. These are great things, and if you are able to join a group, do so! But if for any reason you can't, don't feel cheated or defeated. Ultimately you write alone. And ultimately you alone can judge your work.
>
> Ursula K. Le Guin,
> *Steering the Craft*, ©1998
> The Eighth Mountain Press
> ISBN: 0-933377-46-0

Comments from Community Members:

- **How did you pick crit circle(s) to join?**

“I chose to join only one circle, and I wasn't sure which one I wanted to until I really looked at what I write. Once I'd determined that my writing tends to be somewhat dark (even "happy" endings aren't all that happy) and concern things I've rarely seen (choices between "worse and terrible") I requested to be admitted to the Dark Fantasy Circle.

“Look at your work, dissect it a little, and choose what circle to join using your writing as a guide, not your desires.”

A. Shelton

"I write fantasy almost exclusively, which narrowed the list down. Then, since I write fantasy of several different types, I opted for the Mists, Moonlight and Magic circle (which crits general fantasy) instead of something more specific like Dark Fantasy or Contemporary Fantasy. I don't have the time to join multiple circles and keep up with all of the critting.

"I joined Wordsmithing because a friend of mine who reads my work has, on a few occasions, pointed out particularly effective phrasings; I'm actively pursuing that sort of thing now, and Wordsmithing helps me find it.

"Blades and Bullets I started because fight scenes can crop up in any genre, but can benefit from a more specialized critique than that applied to general narrative."

Bryn

"I write mostly fantasy, so I joined Mists, Moonlight, and Magic, which was general fantasy. At the time I joined, I think it was the only circle devoted only to fantasy. I toyed with starting my own circle, but the next day there was an add for M,M,&M, with the additional info that it would emphasize writing publishable work--from initial drafts to final edits, and since this is basically what I wanted out of my writing, I joined. I remember that I was hesitant at first--do I really want to do this? But now that I regularly post and crit, I don't remember what it was that I was worried about."

Anne

- **How did you get up the nerve to post work?**

"What nerve? I just chose something that looked like a short story to me, closed my eyes (figuratively, of course), and posted it."

A. Shelton

"It's easier online. About a year and a half before I found this place, I joined a writers' group near me; that got me partly inured to it. The nice thing about online critiquing, as opposed to the group, is that I can go bury my face in shame when I get a criticism, then come back the next day and look at it rationally."

Bryn

- **What have you learned from having your work critiqued?**

"I've learned that my "short stories" aren't able to stand by themselves without a lot of work. So far, I've posted two pieces I thought were short stories; One critique of the first suggested I lengthen it to a novel; both critiques of the second story suggested I include some minor details and give some insight to the character."

A. Shelton

"Phrasings that strike me as clever may be confusing to others. I also have to watch out for pov shifts."

Bryn

"What I especially like about the crit-circle critiques is that you get a bunch of them. So, when something appears in almost all the crits, I

know it's a problem. Also, you get different perspectives. Sometimes one person will dislike a part that another person thinks is great, or two people will have different suggestions for how to fix the same problem. I think things that are even more helpful, because it makes me think about why those people thought what they did, and try to evaluate my own work from a distant perspective. Then I can decide with whom I agree, or if I think something else entirely."

Anne

- **What did you learn from critiquing the work of other people?**

"A lot more than I thought I needed to know! Critiquing others' writing is helping me learn how to critique my own. I wish I only learned faster."

A. Shelton

"Let me count the ways . . . . it's easier to see how to fix a problem when the story isn't mine. So, by thinking of potential solutions to other people's problems, I get practice for applying those thoughts to my own work."

Bryn

"I think I learned more from critting other people's work than I do from getting crits of my own stuff. It's teaching me to think about what works, and what doesn't, and I can apply that to my own writing in a more general sense. I also think reading other people's crits of the same piece is enormously helpful. I can see how other opinions are

similar or different to my own. Often people comment on a problem I never noticed, and then when I look, I find I do it my own writing."

Anne

- **Any other crit-circle-related comments?**

"I find that I see a lot of my mistakes after I've posted my stories. Also, the crits aren't as good as I'd like (perfection is unattainable), but they aren't as horrible as I fear, either."

A. Shelton

The Rules were simple:

Write a poem about writing, using the work of another poet as your base. Any published poet is fair game -- Whitman, Shakespeare, Belloc, either Browning, Andrew Marvell . . .

And the Winner is:

Sittin' There, by Allison Starkweather

© 2001, By Allison Starkweather

(parody of Diving Board, by Shel Silverstein)

You've been in front of that keyboard
Making sure the font is right.
You've made sure that you know the plot.
You've made sure that the story's tight.
You've made sure that you're in the mood.
You've made sure you know the motivation.
You've made sure that you've had some food,
And that it's in the right location-
And you've been sittin' there day and night
Doin' everything...but WRITE.

News From Forward Motion

There is always something going on at the Forward Motion Writer's Community. It's easy to become a member, and the site is free.

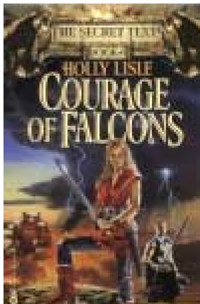
Maren sold her first novel, *ANISE*, to *Wildside Press*. Coincidently, this was a novel she rewrote during the first Forward Motion Writing Dare!

January 1, 2001 is the first day of the second Community Writing Dare. There are several categories for this dare, which includes master and apprentice, novel, short story, and rewrite sections. Latecomers are welcome to join. There will be new dares starting in April, July, and October. Check out the information on the *Games and Contests page*.

The site also features a daily writing exercise. These range from "Write an Interesting first sentence" to "Have a conversation with one of your characters." The posts are a lot of fun! Come and join us at the *Workshops and Exercises Boards*.

Or maybe you'd like to join in a weekly exercise that's devoted just to poetry? Try the one found on the *Poetry and Experimental Prose* page!

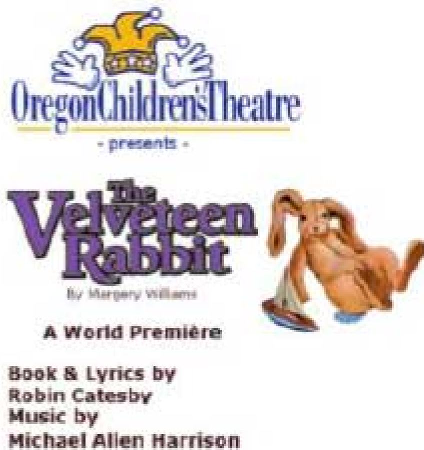
Publication News



The final book in the SECRET TEXT trilogy, by Holly Lisle, has been released.
To defeat the Dragons, Kait and Ry must destroy the source of the sorcerers' power -- the Mirror of Souls. But if they succeed, they will lose the only weapon that

can stop Luercas from becoming a demonic god who will enslave the entire world . . . forever.
Book III of THE SECRET TEXTS

Read the preview chapters | *Read the reviews* | *View the cover* | *Order the book*



The world premiere of Robin Catesby & Michael Allen Harrison's adaptation of The Velveteen Rabbit was performed at the beautiful 2700 seat Arlene Schnitzter Concert Hall in Portland Oregon, this past December 21-24th. For more information about the production, the script and the music (including the original cast recording CD), visit *www.velveteen-rabbit.com* .

March 2001:
Embiid Publishing will present their first electronic original: ***Silky*** by **Lazette Gifford**.

http://www.embiid.net/

Letters to the Editor

Let us know what you think of the Ezine. We'll choose a few to place here in future issues!

Letters to the Editor

In every issue of Vision we'll ask you to share some of your adventures as writers.

For the January 1, 2001 Issue our Question is:

Tell us about the worst rejection slip you’ve ever received.

http://www.sscdc.net/vform/form.htm

Holly Lisle

Editor-In-Chief and Designer and Publisher of .pdf and Palm OS versions

Lazette Gifford

Managing Editor and Designer and Publisher of HTML Version

Visions is published bi-monthly and accepts articles only from people who belong to the Forward Motion Writer's Community. *Joining the community is free*, and it's a great resource for upcoming writers.

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We will happily consider manuscripts from unpublished and published writers – we prefer to be queried (all queries and manuscript submissions are handled by e-mail). We are interested in all facets of writing, from first-person experience articles to genre-specific how-to's to informational articles about your area of specialization – whether it be history or science or nursing or long-distance running – and how and where your specialty can be used correctly by writers. Write something that will help other writers write better, and we'll be interested in taking a look.

We are a non-paying market with a 100% volunteer staff. In return for your work, you get as many copies of the e-zine as you care to download, and our sincere thanks. You're work will make a nice tear-sheet to present when selling other work, but it doesn't count as a professional market because we can't afford to pay.

On the other hand, the e-zine is also free.

We use only non-exclusive serial rights; what this means is that you can sell your piece elsewhere before, during, or after you have placed it with us. We don't mind if it runs simultaneously. However – and this is very important for you to keep in mind – if you place a piece with us that has not been published elsewhere, we will be using your First Serial Rights, which means they will not be available for sale elsewhere. Reprint rights are harder to sell. And back issues will be available from the site (though not from e-zine newsstands) for as long as I can keep them there, as a reference to new people coming into the site.

If you sell a piece elsewhere after we have accepted it but before we have printed it, and you need to have us pull it in order to be able to make your sale, please let us know immediately. We can pull a piece up to a few days before we go to press, but the longer you wait, the

more difficult time we'll have getting another piece copyedited and ready to fill the slot your piece occupied.

We strive to maintain professional standards – manuscripts must be professionally formatted, as free from spelling and grammatical errors as you can make them, and in what you perceive to be final draft form. We will not welcome massive rewrites of a piece after we have accepted it – when we accept it, we consider it pretty close to finished and will only request such edits as will finish it to our standards. If we feel that it need massive rewrites, we won't accept it.

For feature articles, query Lazette Gifford. For genre- or area-specific articles, query the relevant editor. All e-mail addresses are in the masthead.

We look forward to hearing from you.

Holly Lisle and Lazette Gifford
Publishers, Vision