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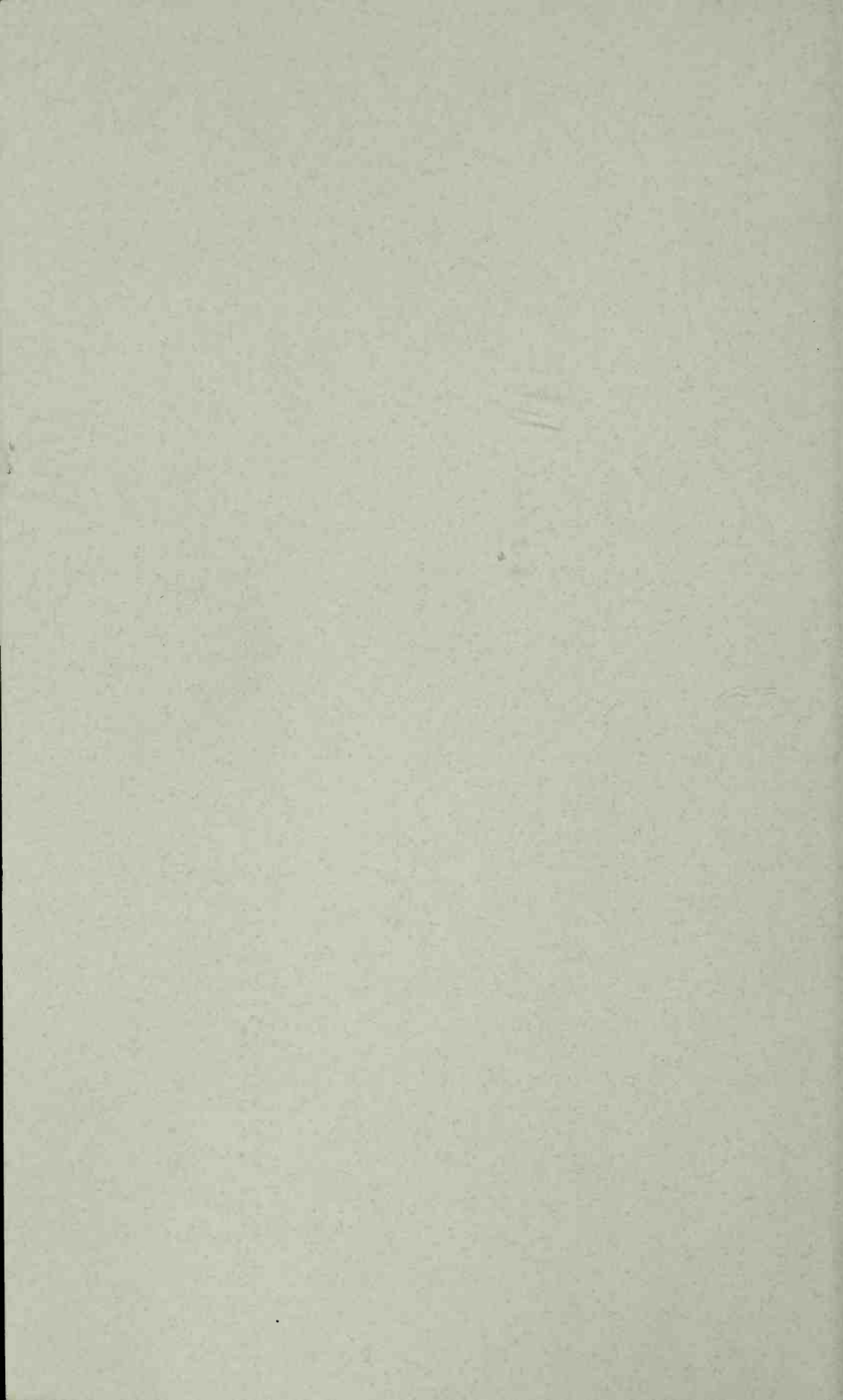
# WRITING to The Point

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A Complete Guide to Selling Fiction



by Algis Budrys



**ALGIS BUDRYS** is Lithuanian for Gordon John Sentry, more or less. (He made a deal with his mother not to change his name.) He has taught at a number of schools and private workshops. He was for eleven consecutive years a visiting writer at Clarion, he has taught courses at Columbia College in Chicago, and he has conducted workshops at the Baron's Cove Inn at Sag Harbor, Long Island; at Brigham Young University, Cal Tech, the Charles Dickens House in London, Pepperdine University, the Taos experimental Writers of The Future workshop, and The Library of Congress, to name a few. He has taught a six-week summer course at Harvard University, several annual workshops in Moscow, Idaho, and many more.

The list of successful graduates of his programs would startle you with their names. More important, over the years a viewpoint and a method have evolved which are second to none. And now they have been put into this book. It is an expanded and cohesive outgrowth of the definitive series on writing that originally ran in *Tomorrow Speculative Fiction* magazine, which he edits and publishes.



Books by Algis Budrys:

Novels:

*False Night*

*Who?*

*Man of Earth*

*The Falling Torch*

*Rogue Moon*

*Some Will Not Die*

(Expanded version of *False Night*)

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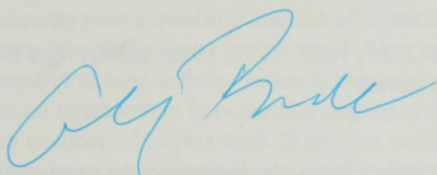
*Bicycles: How They Work*

and *How to Fix Them* (as by Ajay Budrys)

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The Unifont Company  
Evanston, Illinois

Sketches by Algis Budrys and Kandis Elliot

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# INTRODUCTION



**T**he primary purpose of this book is to teach you everything you need to know in order to sell fiction—science fiction and fantasy in particular, but actually any kind of fiction.

If you pay proper attention to the precepts in this book, and do them, and only them, you will sell. Steadily.

As you sell, you will gain experience, and with experience come the grace notes. You will go, then, as far artistically as your talent can take you. But you do not need more than a minimal amount of talent to begin selling fiction, and to continue to sell fiction.

A glance at a handful of best-sellers chosen at random will confirm the truth of this; there is no relationship between the degree of what most people call skill and the number of copies sold. Some are well-written, some are not. The thing they have in common is not good writing; it is the ability to create patterns in the plot. In other words, the important skill is not writing; it is *writing*.

What you will learn in these pages is the important skill; the Arthur Murray diagram of dance steps, from which you will learn enough to tour a dance floor with confidence. From it you may, if you so desire, progress further; step around the ballroom with uncommon style, give exhibitions, become an instructor. But none of those additional things will have much if any relationship to your actual earnings.

So you will find in this book no discussions of style—of voice, and tense, and case, for instance. These things are not basic. Writing professionally is not hard to describe. What is often very complex, and apparently difficult to describe at less than full book length, is a great deal of peripheral material which is often thought to have something to do with writing. I don't think it does.

I believe that if you do exactly what this book calls for, and do not do anything else, you will sell. If you are already selling, you will improve.

This will be harder than it sounds. You will inevitably try to add things you have learned from other books and instructors, and you may also feel that generally you know more than I teach. Perhaps you do, and perhaps the other books and instructors have valuable things to say. But what will happen is that you will confuse the instruction.

Writing—and the only kind of writing we will be talking about is commercial, selling writing—is, it turns out, simple. It took me twelve years of pretty steady effort, from the age of nine on, to learn a few things and

unlearn many, until I began selling consistently at the age of twenty-one. During those twelve years, I picked up, from the many places aspiring writers pick things up, profound discussions of narrative versus dialogue, of viewpoint, and what have you. I also took careful notes as my college instructors taught innumerable lectures dissecting anthologized stories. It was, in short, a wonder I ever sold anything.

Like you, I was browbeaten about the subtle skills of the shining stars of literature, until it was a matter of extreme audacity to think that I would ever be fit to even stay quietly in a corner of the glorious rooms these giants occupied. I felt that until I had mastered every nuance of expression, I was not really ready to commit words to paper. Fortunately, I then blundered into the company of actual writers, and a process of demystification took place. And I began to write, and sell consistently, and all was well. It has been well for forty-odd years.

You may not ever write a best-seller; most people don't. But if you write enough, you will still make a comfortable living if you go about it correctly. And writing successfully has very little to do with most matters discussed in most writing classes; most of them are from the armamentarium of critics and teachers, not of professional writers. Critics and teachers have a living to make, as we all do, but they make it by presenting things in as complicated a light as possible, so that you may be sure of their expertise. I can practically guarantee you that if you listen to enough critics and teachers long enough, and take enough notes, and memorize them, you will eventually turn into a critic and teacher yourself, and will have to write only occasionally, for restricted audiences.

That may very well be what you secretly long for. But let us suppose that you really want to be a writer. That you have been writing for years, but somehow you are not selling, or you are selling only to very small markets, sporadically, with no real idea of why one story seems to work and another story, on which you worked equally hard, doesn't.

What should you do?

I think you should listen to what I have to say. I think it will help. If you listen to *exactly* what I have to say, it will help a lot. And you may prove to have a talent for it, as well, which will make things somewhat easier, and somewhat more pleasurable. And if you have a talent for it, you will gradually learn, by yourself, how to bend the rules I give; ultimately you will discover ways of telling stories that have rarely been done before; perhaps never been done before. But you will still cling to the things you first learned in this book, because these are the basics. They can be bent; they cannot be broken.

With what you learn here, you can pursue a very nice career without frills, you can perhaps never venture very far from these basics, and you can be perfectly satisfied. You may satisfy a great many readers; in fact, you may very well satisfy them more than if you get fancy; fancy has other rewards. Money is not always one of them.



You will come near or to the following point many times in reading what follows; what it boils down to is that writing is work. You may enjoy your work, you may not. The degree of enjoyment is irrelevant. If you write, you are a writer— hopefully, a professional writer—and if you do not, you are not...no matter what you say. And “writing,” though it is called that, has as its least important part the writing down of words, however beautifully arranged.

Far more important is the creation that goes on in your head; the building of girders and anchor points, or of spider webs if you will, that tie a story into a satisfactory whole, with nothing omitted and nothing left over. You may do this entirely before you set down a single word, or you may discover its structure as you go along, but in either case it precedes writing-down.

It precedes it by a lot, or it precedes it by a little, but in any case it precedes it. It may not be done consciously. But it nevertheless precedes it. If you had any doubt of that fact; if as you were reading this you thought “Yes, but...” or “What did he mean by that, really?” now is the time to realize that I meant by that ideation always precedes execution, period, and there are no “Yes, buts...” in my view of things.

This is my method of teaching. The principles embodied in it, imparted face to face in half a hundred workshops, have produced scores of selling writers, some of them by now rather big and famous. Quite a few of them have remarked, over the years, that no one else teaches quite the way I do. And quite a few of them, over the years, have remarked that until I came along, they had been spinning their wheels.

This originally puzzled me; I did not think I was saying anything different, and I did not think I was being particularly original. I still don’t think I’m being particularly original; what I know, I learned at a hundred hands—although it was the late Lester del Rey, the writer, editor, and finally publisher, who laid the foundation, deep and strong. But what I learned at a hundred hands has apparently been put together in sometimes unusual combinations. I don’t know, for sure. Basically, I just teach. And if you let me, I will teach you.

—Algis Budrys

# CHAPTER ONE: THE BASIC BASICS



Writing began at some early point in human history, and at that point was undifferentiated from science.

It certainly predates the discovery of fire. A man or woman tried to understand some aspect of a largely bewildering universe, and probably failed. Unlike most people, they did not then surrender to “practicality” and concentrate for the remainder of their lives on the things that were knowable. Instead, they told themselves something that might have been true. The chances are overwhelming that in fact it wasn’t true, but it was an attempt to explain.

Some of the people who did this became scientists—hewers of rock into new shapes, experimenters with wood and cord, bringers of fire. Others told stories, and at some early point began to tell stories to others. These stories probably were for the most part exercises in imagination—earth, air, fire, and water were personified, and shown in action, to explain, or, rather, to account for what had happened—as distinguished from the usually more mundane and more “real” researches of scientists. Although the audience would contain both future writers and future scientists among it.

That audience—readers—were also apparently different from the general run of population. Most people did not overtly read, then or ever, and if asked would say that reading is useless. But in fact everyone reads, if we understand “reading” to mean not the decoding of written symbols but simply listening to another person who has something vital to say; how to wire a lamp socket, or how to wash a dish, for instance.

The only difference between “nonreaders” and readers is in the kind of thing they will admit to reading. It is really impossible, down at the basic levels, to separate writer from scientist or reader from “nonreader.” (It is actually worse than that, but we have to draw the line somewhere.) We are all, in fact, pretty much the same at bottom; our various learned specialties are what differentiate us, rather than anything basic.

We have, of course, come a long way from our beginnings. Or perhaps we haven’t really, but the number and kind of specialties have become so large that we think we have.

At some point, for instance, speculative fiction developed a branch—descriptive fiction—which for the past century or two has taken a serious look at “the real world,” with interesting results. It is a fruitful subspecies,

and will probably survive. Most of its writers and readers will have little to do with the far older speculative fiction, and speculative fiction in its own turn has split into various kinds of fantasy and, since the Industrial Revolution, into various kinds of science fiction. Some readers of one kind of speculative fiction will have little to do with readers of another, as a general rule. Most will happily partake of many branches of the tree.

And so it goes, as we continue to specialize. For another instance, we have in the past five thousand years or so developed, "writing," so that now stories in most, though not all, cultures are "written down," in order that they may be read by someone at a distance from the "writer,"...provided, of course, that someone learned the same system of coding and decoding that the writer used.

We have, in many ways, in fact overspecialized. But that can't really be helped, because cultures are still, to this day in some cases, isolated from one another, and develop their own peculiar "speech," and "writing," unaware of what may be going on elsewhere. In a way it is unfortunate. But in another way, what one culture misses about the universe may be picked up by another, and there is something therefore to be said for "overspecialization," if that is in fact the correct word.

But, with all that in mind but not overwhelmingly so, suppose you want to learn to write—to somehow transmit stories from your mind to the minds of readers. Where do you begin, and how difficult is it? Well, you begin, if you will, here. And it's not very difficult at all.

Some teachers of writing, including some writers, have made writing a very complicated thing. They speak of "voice" and they speak of technical points like writing in "third person objective," and they speak of "narrative" as distinguished from "dialogue," and cetera. Well, in an abstract sense that language may refer to real things. (I think they are real, but have to do with criticism, not with writing.) But remember that every specialty develops jargon, and remember that writing is one of the oldest specialties. Also, take my word for it, most of the people who are now so glib in discussing these matters did not know them at the time of their first sales, or, conversely, have never sold anything, but have simply learned the jargon.

Writing is, in fact, a simple creative exercise. It takes practice, and with enough practice many people gradually learn the "rules" without any special jargon—picking it up later, as I said. But the very fact that they can learn writing by simple trial and error should tell you something. If you can learn it by trial and error, then all you need to do to shorten the process is to eliminate as much of the error as possible as early as possible—and that is what we are going to do.

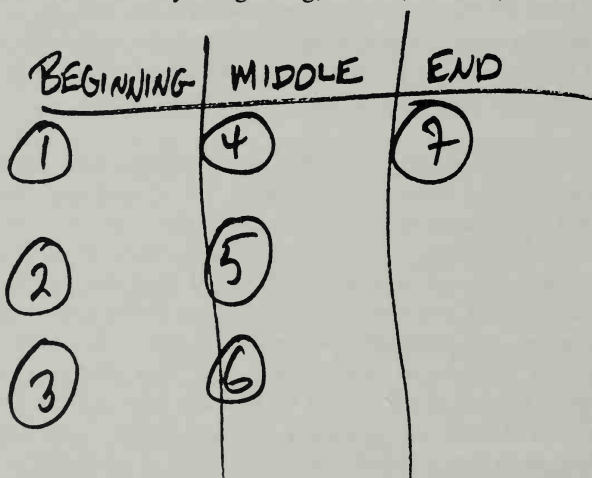
Now, the kind of writing I am talking about is the production of work in volume for an audience—the kind you see in a magazine, for instance. And that kind consists overwhelmingly of stories. There are also vignettes, jokes, japes, and other small forms, which are small for various reasons, I

think most of them transient.

In another time, the vignette, for instance—the slice of life, in which the characters are not subject to any process in particular—may become the preferred thing. Certainly it has a place in any age, and you will, from time to time, see vignettes published in many places. But what most readers want most of the time is story, and that is what we are going to teach you. Know how to construct a story, and you know everything you need to know.

A story subjects its characters to a process; to a growing up, or an enlightenment, or, in the case where a villain is the central character, to an enlightenment and a disaster. It is a reflection of the Judeo-Christian ethic, if you will. For whatever reason, it satisfies. It satisfies the reader and it satisfies the writer. And it has seven parts.

They tell you, if you listen, that a story must have a beginning, a middle, and an end. Well, this is true enough, but so does a note from your bank, which says: "Dear Mr. Smith, you are overdrawn \$18.75, pay or die." The simple statement that a story must have a beginning, middle, and end is no more useful than another old saying: Write what you know. (What do they mean by that one? How can you write about what you don't know?) To understand what is meant by a beginning, middle, and end, draw a diagram:



You will notice there are three story components in the beginning. These three are actually interchangeable; none is more important than the other two, and we can number them in any order. But for the sake of convenience, let's number them (1) A character (2) in context (3) with a problem.

You can, as I say, begin with a context, and introduce a character with his or her problem; you can even, in some cases, begin with the problem, and introduce a context and then a character. What counts is that all three must be present before the beginning is over.

(1) A character must be placed in (2) a context. If Joe walks up the side of a wall, it is vital to know if this is happening in downtown Detroit today

or aboard a space station; two vastly different stories will result, much more from the context than from Joe. Then, Joe has to have (3) a problem; he has to get somewhere, or get something.

Now, perhaps obviously, you want to pick a character who's vitally interesting. But to do this you will quickly find you cannot avoid filling in the context to some extent, and then you very quickly come up against the problem.

The problem need not seem very large, at first; it's just that the character can't let go of it. But as the story progresses, the problem becomes more and more compelling. Its basic nature does not change, however. Put it this way: Laurine spots a white thread on her black dress. She pulls at it almost casually. She discovers, however, that it is endless, and while the part that showed was white, the rest is black, and her dress is unravelling. In other words, Laurine thought her problem was a stray thread, and easily solved, but it rapidly develops into another order of problem entirely—without changing the basic nature of the problem.

Similarly, the context cannot change, without motivated traveling, but we learn more about it. And the character cannot actually change, past the beginning, though we learn more about him or her, too. The purpose of the beginning is to lay the ground rules; establish the (1) character (2) in context (3) with a problem, and then go on. Once the beginning is over, you can't call in the cavalry, you can't have the character develop a rich uncle, you can't have the character decide the problem doesn't hold his or her interest anymore. If you want the cavalry at the end, you have to have the character wave at a friend in a cavalry patrol in the beginning, or else the totally unforeshadowed arrival of the cavalry will (A) jar and (B) make your hero look ineffectual.

And that brings us to the three parts of the middle. Here is where the story develops.

(4) is an attempt to solve the problem. This attempt must be intelligent and logical, and represent the character's best guess as to the nature of the problem and an adequate response. The character mustn't think that the problem is overwhelming, because at this stage it apparently isn't. He produces a nice, easy response—and (5) encounters unexpected failure.

Well, if the character could solve the problem immediately, it wasn't much of a problem. So, despite the seeming intelligence of the attempt to solve, it must fail—and as a result of that failure, the character learns more about the problem, and begins to learn a little more about himself.

He does not actually change, mind you, because that would be false to the reader's observation of people. People reveal hidden facets of themselves, from time to time, under stress, but the facets all fit in with what was known before. So you must put your character under stress, and reveal hitherto concealed facets, but they must fit. The character reaches a little deeper inside himself, makes another attempt to solve the problem, which is revealing additional aspects of itself in turn, and fails again. And again. Three times.



Why three times? Because anything less is unsatisfying, because anything more is redundant, because Aristotle and Lewis Carroll said that what I tell you three times is true. Three times, on a rising scale of effort, commitment, and depth of knowledge of the problem and one's self, is the correct number. Human beings believe that three times has an effect which two does not. Conversely, four creates overkill.

All right. (6) is victory. At the last possible moment, wagering everything, in a do-or-die situation, the hero wins. Conversely, if he is the villain, coming closer and closer to his goal results at the last possible moment in defeat snatched from the jaws of victory, because of some flaw in his character.

So the middle of the story consists of (4) effort to solve, (5) repeated failure or increasingly near-attainment of the goal, and (6) victory or death.

You must make sure that the reader understands it is victory or death. Even in a story about winning the garden club prize, you must get to the stage where the aging, widowed and lonely woman realizes, near the end, that nothing is more important than the prize; that if she fails to win it, she will spend the last of her declining years disappointed, with nothing to look forward to except the grave.

But since victory or death has been achieved at the end of the middle, according to this diagram, what is left for the end?

What is left for the end is (7) validation. Someone who has no other vested interest in the story has to step forward and say, "He's dead, Jim," or, "Who was that masked man...I wanted to thank him," or the like. Think about it; all through the middle, it always looked like things were going to come out well, but they didn't. Certainly, now the villain has plunged from the top of the Empire State Building and is lying splattered on the terrain below. But.... But. The possibility exists, however slight.... And that is what the independent authority forecloses. He is the one who actually validates the fact that the story is truly over. Until he speaks, even with something so seemingly clichéd as "Who was that masked man?" the story is not truly over in the reader's mind.

**W**hat have we learned? We have learned the seven parts of the basic story, including part (7) validation. In the next chapter, we will learn that the manuscript is not the story, that writing is not the reverse of reading, and other useful things, including a demonstration of how the seven parts work. But you have already learned more than enough to get started on your career. ■



## CHAPTER TWO: THE BASICS



**T**he manuscript is not the story. Remember that. The manuscript is but the convenient way to transmit the story, by means of coded hardcopy which is decipherable by a majority of the English-speaking world. But there was a time when this was not true, and apparently there will come a time when it is not true again. Other ways will be found to transmit the story.

It is an error—understandable, but an error nonetheless—to speak of working on your story, when what you mean is you are going to find a means of making your manuscript transmit the story more accurately. The story already exists in your mind, most of the time, whether you consciously know that or not. Even if you swear you're just making it up as you go along, something exists in some part of your mind, monitoring what your hands are doing, telling you this is OK, and that is not OK; guiding your creation. Obviously it is so, now that you think about it.

This has certain consequences. For example, working on the last couple of paragraphs of the manuscript may do nothing to improve the ending. Very likely, it will only confuse you. The problem with the ending consists of how you set up the beginning of the manuscript, or the middle. An ending does not exist in the last few words of the manuscript; it exists in the very purpose of the story, which purpose ideally is partially expressed in the very first word, and in all the words thereafter.

There is a very real difference between the manuscript and the story. The manuscript has to proceed from left to right, top to bottom, in serial order. No such limitation exists on the story, which lives in your mind and is multiplex. I defy you to tell me where and how a story is born. You may immediately begin recasting that moment of creativity into manuscript form, either written down or in your mind, but that is already after the fact. The story—whether you consciously know it or not—was already born, in a shroud of mystery we can only approximately understand. And it is in reconciling the story and the manuscript transmission mechanism that the skills of writing lie.

**L**et us go back to the seven parts, as explained in the last chapter. (1) a character, (2) in context, (3) with a problem, (4) makes an intelligent attempt to solve the problem but (5) fails, because the problem is more

complex than he thought. He tries again, more urgently, and fails again, and tries again, each time learning more about the problem, each time staking more, until with one last maximum effort, staking everything, he (6) wins. And a trustworthy but otherwise disinterested character says "He's dead, Jim," or the moral equivalent, and that is (7), validation.

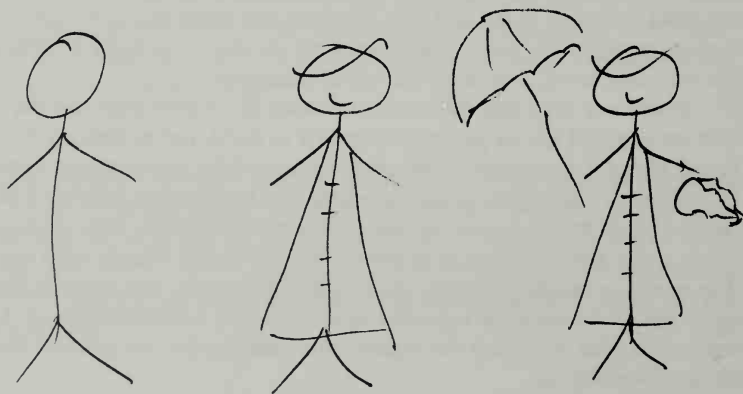
Validation, you will remember, actually proceeds throughout the story in many ways. The hero never does anything uncharacteristic. The time of day proceeds rationally. The birds do not change from starlings to sparrows. But the biggest validation comes with "He's dead, Jim."

Someone believable has to say that, because of all the stuff that went on in (4) and (5), in which it looked like the hero was going to win, but at the last minute didn't. And even now, with the villain having gone off the top of the Empire State Building, there exists some small element of doubt in the reader's mind, until he hears "He's dead, Jim," from a trustworthy, otherwise disinterested, source. Or, from the author, if he or she has maintained a neutral tone.

Readers are like that. They remember every part of a story, and compare each new part, coming in in serial order, to all the old parts. They don't file those parts in serial order; they file them according to a lot of things, and one of the tags on each item is where it belongs in serial order, but they file them according to a lot of things. Remember that.

Then, they require the big validation at the end, and they require all the small validations in the rest of the story. Each time they spot an inconsistency, some readers will drop off. That's the big difference between the writer who barely does OK and the writer who really succeeds; the latter doesn't lose readers.

But let me tell you the story of Sarah Jane.



*What is at first a barely perceptible figure blooms as you write; for instance, becomes a high school girl...*

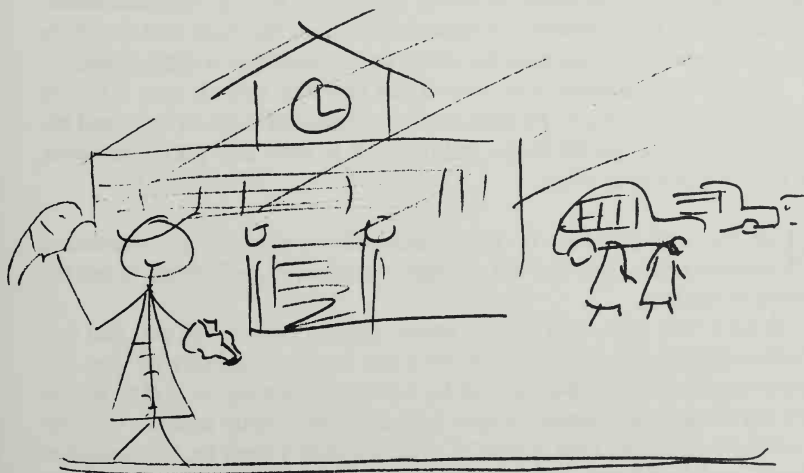
So there she stands, outside the school at 3:00 with her violin case and her umbrella, in the rain. The reader can see that, now, as well as the school buses off to one side with students going to them, but the girl does not join them. Why does she not join them?

Because of the violin case. She is waiting for a cab. She ordered it yesterday, with forethought, as she shows forethought in many things. Her name is Sarah Jane, she is about to graduate from the high school in Wet Prairie, Minnesota, and today she will play at an audition for Itzhak Perlman, who is in town between planes, and she will get a four-year scholarship to the Juilliard School of Music in New York City, and she will go on to be a famous concert violinist and get out of Wet Prairie. And the cab does not come.

All right, it doesn't come. Sarah Jane has a backup plan. In her pocket is the exact change for the bus, and so she turns and walks up to the corner bus stop. It won't be quite as convenient, she won't have the solitude of the cab ride to psych herself up as is her wont, but it will take more than that to stop her on her one chance to be more than a small town violin teacher. And the bus doesn't come.

All right. One avenue block away is another bus line. If she runs, and if the bus comes right away, it will let her off downtown close enough to the audition hall so that if she runs she will still make it. So Sarah Jane takes off lickety split for the other bus line.

And who should she see, in the middle of the block, but good old Doctor Brown, her neighbor, just getting into his car. Doctor Brown, over the years, has done a number of small favors for Sarah Jane and her widowed mother, and of course he will now take her downtown. Her heart leaps up,



*...With an umbrella and a violin case, in front of her high school in the rain, at three o'clock in the afternoon.*

and she goes running up to Doctor Brown, who looks at her distractedly and says: "Oh, hello, Sarah Jane, I'm sorry, but I haven't got time to talk. I just got a phone call from my wife. She's downtown, and there's been a bad fire in a department store, and traffic's all snarled up, and she can't get home, and I have to get the roast out of the oven before it burns. Goodbye, Sarah Jane, and should you be out running in the rain like that?" And he drives away.

Sarah Jane stands there dumbfounded. Not only has Doctor Brown failed her, she now knows there will be no bus anywhere, to say nothing of a cab. And it's three-thirty, and Itzhak Perlman has to leave at four, and what will she do?

At that point, a '57 Chevy with a yahoo sucking on a Budweiser behind the wheel goes rumbling by. And the yahoo leans out the window, and hollers: "Hey, Girlie, whatcha doin' fiddlin' around in the rain? Yuk yuk yuk!" He tosses the empty over the side and roars away.

Sarah Jane is crushed. Completely crushed. What will she do?

She takes inventory. She has her umbrella, her violin case, and her talent. That's it. And she remembers that Nero fiddled while Rome burned. And she stops to think that if she gets out in the middle of the street and plays her violin, that is a sufficiently odd thing to do that someone is bound to stop and ask her what the hell? And she can explain, and get a ride. Or at least that's her only remaining chance. So she steps to the middle of the street.

And remembers that it's raining, and you don't expose your violin to the elements like that. But at this point, she isn't thinking in long chains at all. She thrusts the handle of the umbrella down the back of her slicker, she unsnaps the violin case under its cover, and begins to play, not even realizing, really, that the umbrella has settled down over her head and she looks like a mad mushroom, playing the violin in the middle of a main street.

Well, to make a short story shorter, the guy who stops is cop. When he hears Sarah Jane's story, he uses his knowledge of back alleys, and his lights and siren, to get her to the audition hall in time. She plays, she wins, she lives happily ever after.

**N**ow, that's all you have to do, mechanically. And it's a very interesting demonstration of a fact not enough writers realize: Writing is not the reverse of reading.

It isn't. You saw a bus stop, a street, Doctor Brown, his car, and lots of other details, in your head. Where are they written down? The '57 Chevy rumbled. Why? Because of its Lakes exhaust pipes, right? Where did I say it had Lakes pipes? Where did I describe exactly how the umbrella settled over Sarah Jane's head? I didn't. I didn't have to; you supplied all that, and God bless you, because for every detail you supply, I don't have to. And that's very good, because my details are not as good, as convincing, as yours.

One of the most common mistakes a beginning writer makes is overwriting. He feels he has to describe the color of the dress the woman wears as she crosses the foyer, and the rug she treads on, and the piano in the corner, and the candelabrum on the piano, and the moth circling the flame on the candelabrum, when all the woman is going to do is open the door to the axe murderer's knock.

Well, next time we will go into that more deeply. And we will explain why Sarah Jane's story, as it stands, is just awful, and what has to be done to it to make it less awful. But, even so, not only have you got the rudiments, you are beginning to pick up some of the grace notes, too. You can write. You can. Almost any damned fool can, and many of them do. If I can do it, believe me, you can too. ■

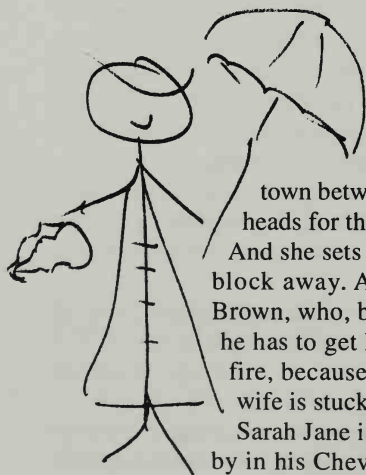
## CHAPTER THREE: SARAH JANE AND WHAT SHE MEANS



What is it that makes a collection of marks on paper come to life as a story? What is it, in other words, that successfully transmits a writer's construction of thought into an analogous structure of thought in the reader? Suppose a writer follows a plotline like the one we spoke of last time, with the heroine resolving her difficulties triumphantly. Will that do it? Will that make the story seem, for a little while, like reality?

I doubt it. Because we have not yet spoken of making the reader care. And reader care is vital.

It is all very well to speak of a high school girl, with her violin in the rain, trying to get downtown to the audition hall in time. But who is Sarah Jane, and how is she organized, and why should she succeed?



We first see her standing in front of the Wet Prairie, MN, high school at 3:00 o'clock, waiting for the cab she ordered yesterday to take her to the audition hall, where she will play for Itzhak Perlman who is in town between planes. And the cab does not come, so she heads for the corner bus stop. And the bus does not come. And she sets out headlong for the other bus line an avenue block away. And she runs into old family friend Doctor Brown, who, before she can explain her difficulty, tells her he has to get home and turn off the roast before it catches fire, because there has been a big fire downtown and his wife is stuck there. And he gets into his car and goes.

Sarah Jane is crushed. Nor is she helped when a boor goes by in his Chevy and jeers witlessly at her. But she gathers herself and goes to play her violin in the middle of the street, in the hope that this will attract attention from some passing motorist. And it brings a cop, who uses his knowledge of back alleys to get her to the audition hall, and she plays, and wins the scholarship that will get her out of Wet Prairie. But so what?

What you have to do is explain several things.



When the cab does not come, in the beginning, Sarah Jane is disappointed because now she will not go the audition hall as she would have wanted, alone and psyching herself up as is her usual wont. However, she can tolerate the public bus ride instead. But as she moves from in front of the school to the bus stop, she recalls a conversation she had yesterday with Mrs. Green, her violin teacher.

"Mrs. Green," she recalls herself saying, "I will never forget you. Even though I'm going to win the scholarship to the Juilliard School of Music, and become a concert violinist, I will come back regularly and play to benefit your teaching. I have no doubt I will win. You have said yourself that you have never heard anyone as good as me, and I can play any piece put in front of me on an instant's notice, playing it exactly as written. So I am very grateful to you."

"Well, that's very nice, Sarah Jane," Mrs. Green had responded, "I'll be down at the rehearsal hall to play your accompaniment and I hope it all works out for you. But remember there's many a slip twixt tongue and lip."

And now, moving to the bus stop, Sarah Jane realizes she has learned a profound lesson. There is something special to being an adult; without any evidence whatsoever, Mrs. Green was able to predict that the cab might not come.

And then, running to the other bus line, she bumps into good old Doctor Brown just coming out of his office. But he does not have any time for her, despite the occasions in the past he has helped her and her widowed mother in small ways. She realizes then that in life when push comes to shove she has to rely primarily on herself; that even normally friendly people have their own urgent concerns now and then, and if she wants something from them at those times, she has to attract their attention first.

And there will be no cabs, or busses, obviously, until Downtown gets unsnarled.

And then the yahoo goes by in his '57 Chevy and says "Hey, Girlie, what are you doing fiddling around in the rain, yuk yuk yuk," and throws his empty Budweiser can over the side and takes off, and she is at first devastated. What gives him the right to poke fun at her? He doesn't know her, he doesn't know how big a day this is in her life, he doesn't know anything, but he feels it's perfectly O.K. to jape at her! What gives him the right! And she gets mad, blazing mad, and she takes a furious inventory; she has her violin and her talent, and that's all she has with her, and Nero fiddled while Rome burned, and by God she's going to attract somebody's attention, and she steps out into the middle of the street and plays, with her umbrella handle down the back of her coat to shield her violin, and she looks like a mad mushroom with her yellow slicker, and a cop stops. And she doesn't mince words with him; she tells him he's got to take her to the audition hall, and he, bemused, takes her, and she slams the cruiser door shut, she flings open the audition hall door, she rips off her slicker and umbrella, she hastily re-tunes, and she strides out on stage at the last moment. Mrs. Green gives her the downbeat, and she plays. For the audience, and for Itzhak Perlman.

And as she plays, she thinks about everything she has been through in the last hour, and it is almost more than flesh can bear. She didn't even have time to compose herself, as is her wont; she just got out here and played. She thinks about all these things, and— She realizes the piece is over. She has played the whole thing, and she didn't hear a note of it. Oh, she would have heard it if something had gone wrong, she was, in fact, listening, but she wasn't...paying attention in that particular way. She was, instead, thinking of something important.

And another thing; nobody's applauding.

She lets the violin and bow sink down by her sides, helpless. She knows how audiences normally react. Somebody always starts clapping ahead of the last note, either in relief that it's over or to show that they know the piece. And then the rest of the audience joins in, for whatever reason, and that's it. But this time—oh, it can't really be more than a second, but it seems a lifetime—nothing's happening. And she notices that a man in the front row has tears in his eyes. And he's not the only one. And now they're standing! And now they're applauding, like nothing she has ever heard before, and they're going wild, and Itzhak Perlman comes bounding down the aisle—it's a miracle—and throws his arms around her, and hands her the check, and says "Never, never, never have I heard that piece played with such expression!" and the audience files out, and Itzhak Perlman goes, and the lights go down, all except for a single worklight, and Sarah Jane stands under it, violin still hanging at her side, bow and check in her other hand, and blinks in bewilderment.

And Mrs. Green comes out from behind the piano, and she's crying, and as Sarah Jane asks "What the hell happened?" Mrs. Green shakes her head in wonder, and says "Sarah Jane! Sarah Jane, what a time to have it happen! For years, now, you've been a superb technician, but today—Today, of all days, you were an artist."

It's still not a great story. In fact, it's quite bad in many ways. But it means something to the audience now; it has purpose.

And that's what it's got to have. It's got to have sustained purpose, from the first word on, and if it has that, the audience will go for it. Never mind that intrinsically it's trivial; trivial is for critics. Does it have purpose, does it tell a story? If it does that, it will succeed. And a critic doesn't even pay for his copy.

Think about that, for a moment. A critic is somebody paid to read, and to bring to it deep thoughts, whether he has any or not. He is somebody with a deadline, and expectations from his editors. In other words, he is not like the normal reader at all.

Critics have a lot of value in the world of criticism, which supports innumerable publications and academic careers. But they have nothing intrinsic to do with the world of writing, which is based on transactions between you and your reader. And your reader just reads; he doesn't mar-

shall his thoughts preparatory to getting them down on paper, and he doesn't have to get them in by a certain time, and he doesn't have to bear anybody else's opinion in mind. He just reads. And if you can enlist his cooperation in getting him involved in an alternate reality, you are a success, and if you can't, you're not. That's all there is to it.

**R**eally.

In the next chapter, we will learn even more. For instance, why, from the standpoint of criticism, not all of the seven parts are in all stories. But, you now have absolutely all you will ever need; the basics. All you really have to do is practice them. Them, and only them. I'm not kidding. ■

## CHAPTER FOUR: THE STORY AND THE MANUSCRIPT



I have told you about the seven parts of the story, and said that in order to be a story, instead of something else, all seven parts have got to be in there. This is true. It is also true that in reading stories, it does not always seem to be true. Why is this?

Well, some very successful pieces of fiction have not been stories. This is more likely to be so when the piece is short; the shorter, the more likely it is to be a jape. A jape does not have to be funny; it has to have the characteristic of being one-punch in a contrived setting. Now, all settings are of course contrived, but in a jape they are obviously contrived, in order that the punch be outrageous. Most japes are funny, and they draw their name from a rich tradition of humor. Humor depends in large part on the outrageous, and thus one tends to think funny when confronted with an obvious setup for a punchline. But many japes, particularly when written and sold in the fiction market, are not so much funny as they are *verging* on humor. Damon Knight's "Not With a Bang" for example.

In it, a lone male survives a worldwide holocaust. He is, however, subject to peculiar fits; every so often, he becomes temporarily paralyzed. However, he now has the (temporary) antidote. Finally he meets the last surviving woman, and she is crazy about him. She has a peculiarity; she is pathologically shy. But she agrees to give him the antidote when he needs it, and he gives her the whole supply. Then he excuses himself to go the men's room; he steps inside, the door whispers shut, and the paralysis hits. The woman will never enter the men's room. He is doomed. Thus a jape.

Now, for a beginning writer, this is a very difficult form. Even for an advanced writer, this is a difficult form if one does not have much of a bent for it. The result is that few japes get published, because few get written. The story, on the other hand, is amenable to just about everyone.

Understand me. The chances are very, very good that if you practice long enough, and practice the correct things, and only the correct things, you will sell a story—perhaps more than one—whether you have any talent or not. A story.

Talent—which, by the way, is one of those words for which there is in fact no exact definition—is a vastly over-rated commodity. What wins in





horrid little man who has swarmed off a barstool. "I'll bet you think that's going to light!" the horrid man declares.

Our viewpoint character looks at the lighter in his hand. "Why, yes," he says, "this lighter usually works the first time."

"I'll bet it doesn't. I'll bet—" And the horrid man goes on to name the house on the hill, the Rolls Royce parked outside, the yacht in the harbor, and what have you. Our viewpoint character is shaken; he sees the barflies watching intently, he suddenly becomes aware that he is totally at the mercy of the circumstances, and, thank God, he has an out.

"I don't have anything to bet," he says. "I'm just an average bloke. So, I'm sorry, but—"

The horrid man whips a hatchet out from under his coat. "You've got a finger, haven't you?"

And the situation develops, so that our man is finally at the table with one hand pinned down and his little finger extended, the horrid man has his hatchet poised, and the cigarette is in the man's trembling lips as he raises the lighter to it and prepares to flick—

When the door bursts open. "Stop" says the horrid woman who has come in. "Don't do it! He doesn't own any of that stuff he bet you! He doesn't own the house on the hill, the Rolls Royce parked outside, or the yacht in the harbor! No! They're mine! All mine," she says, brandishing a hand which is missing almost all its fingers.

And that's the end of the manuscript. And it is only at the end that you realize the viewpoint character that Dahl has given you is unimportant to the story, except in the sense that somebody had to furnish the hand and the naivete. The story is about the man and the woman, living out their lives in this town, terminally bored, chopping away at each other, and now at passing strangers, going to go on and on until one kills the other or a passing stranger, or both. There is a sense that the property over which they contend may have been part of an estate, and they the heirs to it. There is a sense—just as much of a sense—that neither of them owns the property. But clearly there is a story developing in there somewhere, validated by the woman's words and gesture, with the climax yet to come.

Dahl was a devilishly clever short story writer; go ahead and surpass him if you can.

At least one writer did. John Collier wrote many great short stories, among which is numbered "The Chaser." In it, a young man searches along a back street until he comes to a dark and obscure store labeled "Shop," with stuffed baby alligators and crystal balls and what is either the horn of a narwhal or a unicorn in the dimly-lit window. The young man goes inside, with a bell on a spring jangling to announce his presence. Way in the back, beyond shelves laden with all sorts of arcane stuff or else junk, is a counter, and getting up from behind the counter is a gentleman of a certain age, saying politely "May I help you, sir?"

The young man looks around to reassure himself he is in the right place. "I want," he says, "some of your infallible love potion."



"Ah, yes, the love potion. Well, I can sell you some of that, certainly, but it's really trivial. Couldn't I interest you in our absolutely undetectable poison, instead?"

"Are you crazy? I want some of the love potion. I've met the most wonderful girl in the world, but she doesn't like me. I want her to love me, to marry me, to see to my every need, to hang on my every word, to be unable to be separated from me under any circumstances!"

"Ah, yes. Well, that's all very fine, but our undetectable poison—"

"Stop it! Sell me the love potion. How much is it?"

The man shrugs and plucks a small bottle off a shelf. "Fifty cents. Here it is. Now, our undetectable poison is a lot dearer; it calls for you to sign over everything you've got. But—"

"Stop it! This is what I want," says the young man, snatching up the bottle, throwing down a fifty-cent piece, and walking back to the front door. At the door, he stops, and turning toward the storekeeper, says "Well, good-bye," and exits to the jangling of the bell. "Au revoir," says the storekeeper.

Well, first of all, if you don't know "au revoir" means "'til I see you again," the story is in trouble with you. But when Collier wrote it, he had every reason to believe most of his audience did know it. He took a much larger chance in depending on his audience to be mature enough to realize that what the young man thought he wanted would soon enough become intolerable to him. But, too, by then a good deal of the world knew what to expect from John Collier, and to consume it eagerly.

Now, the thing about "The Chaser," like the thing about "The Man From the South," is that you can search the manuscript from one end to the other, and not find all of the seven parts.

The seven parts have not yet occurred fully; we have not had our climax yet. But it is precisely because we expect all seven parts, and to have them occur in the future, that the stories work. (They work, by the way, no matter what the actual Part Six may suppositionally be, as long as all the possible Part Sixes are satisfactory.) They are not japes, although "The Man From the South" almost reads like one. The difference between them and "Not With a Bang" is that we can see the climax looming in the future, but it is not here yet.

That's OK. You will remember that although a manuscript runs from left to right, from top to bottom, with events necessarily occurring in serial order, a story lives in the mind, which is not only capable of handling multiplex inputs but in fact much prefers them. Although the raw input from the manuscript necessarily enters the mind serially, it is immediately translated into something the mind can handle much better. Remember that readers compare each new bit of information to all the previous bits, and that they assign values to those bits according to a great many criteria, not just the simple one of "this is the latest bit." As the story takes provisional shape, that includes bits that haven't come yet, but are likely to. If the manuscript does nothing to contradict them, those bits will continue to maintain their validity.

Those bits are based on everything the reader has found in your manuscript up to that point. If it turns out you didn't mean them, in the end, you will be accused, probably rightly, of introducing nonsequiturs, and your story will be downgraded sharply. But if you do mean them, you have something like "The Man From the South" or "The Chaser."

(Incidentally, that species of nonsequitur is called a "red herring," and is named for the practice, of English conservationists, of drawing a red herring across the track of the fox, thus diverting the hounds.)

You will notice also, from "The Man From the South," that items 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 7 may not be, in the end, what they seem for the bulk of the manuscript. You thought you knew what they were, but they were not. Nevertheless, they were there; they just weren't written down, or in some cases were written down but you assigned a different value to them.

(A) do not be chagrined; Dahl would have failed in his story if you could get them right while reading the manuscript; (B) the general lesson to be learned is that just because a thing is simple doesn't mean it is necessarily applied simple-mindedly.

**S**o. I would suggest you think, hard, before you start getting fancy at the beginning of your career. It's hard to write as well as Roald Dahl or John Collier at the peaks of their careers; they didn't start that way either. And it's not only hard, it restricts your audience to a group of relative sophisticates. There is something to be learned from the fact that Dahl, Collier, and most superb short story writers, were relatively unsuccessful as novelists. Too much sophistication at a time is bad for sales.

Put it another way; if you read many best-sellers, as I did for years for the *Chicago Sun-Times*, you will swiftly see that their authors put the seven parts out there in plain sight, and keep their stories relatively simple. Their reward is riches beyond the dreams of most writers. Many of them know how to write "better" than they do; they also know it would be suicide to their bank balances.

But even in speculative fiction, which presumably is what we're really talking about, many writers, old and new, have made a career of putting all seven parts into the manuscript. They may not get talked about when "really good writers" are discussed by other writers—though they equally well may—but (A) that doesn't stop any editor worth his or her paycheck, and (B) most of the talk about writers you hear from writers is worthless. No writer can possibly reach a truly objective opinion about another writer. What counts is what goes on between you and your readers; very little else matters.

But:

The curtain rises on the first act. We are in the dining room of an English manor house. The maid is polishing the chandelier. The butler is at the sideboard, counting the silver.

MAID: Ah, today's the day the Master gets out of prison, to which he was so cruelly sent by perjured testimony. I wonder what sort of revenge he will take against those who pulled him down.

BUTLER: Yes. And I wonder what the Mistress and the chauffeur will do now.

That is known as maid-and-butler dialogue. Don't do that. Also don't go on for pages before you let the reader in on the protagonist's name, do not—unless you are an experienced old hand—have the protagonist wake up with a hangover to start the story, and for God's sake don't write a story about a misunderstood child. It has, believe me, been done.

Trust your reader to know the difference between natural dialogue and declaration; trust your reader to know that a drunken protagonist has limited possibilities because that is always going to be the most important thing about him; trust your reader to have had a misunderstood childhood of his own, and to be sick of hearing about other people's. In other words, don't do the blatant, and don't expect your reader to be stupid.

Now, you may be wondering what all this has to do with novels. If you aren't, you should be. But it is basically very simple; there are two kinds of novels, and both of them are built up from short stories.

One kind, which is the rarer kind, is the picaresque novel. In it, a hero has to get from here to there, in order to accomplish some sort of desirable purpose. This takes him a series of chapters to accomplish, and each chapter is a separate short story, not necessarily having much to do with the main plot, which incidentally leaves him closer to his main goal but which is, as I said, a separate short story—which could be published as such. This is the older form of the novel, being named for the Spanish word for “rogue,” since most of these stories are about rogues.

The other form of the novel is more recent, and it is essentially a blown-up short story. There are more characters, and they have stories of their own—more or less, depending on the importance of the character—which intersect the hero's or heroine's story. That story, too, will take longer to work out, obviously. But when you strip it down to its essentials, this form of novel is a short story with intersections.

And that is why it seems good to write and sell some short stories before taking on the job of writing a novel. It's not necessary—some writers launch directly into novels, others somehow never write a successful novel over the course of a career—but it helps most writers.

Writers are definitely individuals. So, next we will talk about writing being a lonely profession, and what that really means. ■

## CHAPTER FIVE: CREATIVE LONELINESS



Your writing cannot be done by anybody else but you. Also, when you are not actually doing it, you are doing something other than writing.

That may not strike you as revelatory. But you would be surprised, I'm sure, how many writers are confused on these points. Many people who call themselves writers, for example, spend very little time doing writing. They are attending publishers' parties for themselves and other writers, they are attending professional and amateur conventions, they are writing letters of comment and reply to comment, they are on extended trips doing research, and so forth. Some of them are so busy doing this that they have no time to actually write.

(What is meant by "writing" in this context, of course is the writing of fiction; the creation, in one's head and hopefully in the reader's, of places and people that have never been.)

There is a possible difference between the person who has not yet made it and the person who has. The person who has not yet made it tends to spend a fair amount of time writing or seriously preparing to write. The person who has made it may not.

This is because the would-be writer may not in fact want to be a writer; rather, he or she wants to go to parties and be recognized as a writer. This person has seen films and read books in which writing is a recognized glamor profession, and this person wants a slice of that. And so, once this person has sold a piece or two—whatever that person decides is the equivalent of making it—he or she spends a great deal of time at something other than writing...the more wrapped in glitter, the better. The glitter does not, on close inspection, prove to be very genuine, but the person who seeks it will probably not be discouraged by that, reasoning that tomorrow's party, or the next town, will contain the genuine article. A genuinely idealistic and optimistic member of this group will never give up searching.

A fair number of variously good writers do this; write just enough to keep their reputations alive, and meanwhile for instance serve in a bewildering number of writers' organizations in a number of capacities, and are sure to show up at cocktail parties besides. A number of them find work as essayists, literary agents and editors; anything to preserve the feel and appearance of writing. But they do not, in fact, write very much.

I don't know whether this is bad or good, and I only have theories as to why it is. But real writers don't do it. That very rare person, the real writer, in effect just writes. When they're not actually writing, they're resting from writing, and they get back to it as soon as they can.

Which means they are always prepared to take on the responsibility for being a writer. Not the blame or fame, not the glamor or the adverse criticism—the responsibility—which means the isolation from everything and everybody immediately real, in order to create reality. To these people, writing is not only a lonely profession, it is an aggressively lonely profession. It is, specifically, a profession whose practitioner says to spouse, offspring, garbage man and bill collector: "Not now. Later."

It is, I suppose, an arrogant view. It says that no one but the given writer is capable of creating these particular realities, and it says that creating these realities is the most important thing that could be done. Well, that may very well be genuine arrogance, though I doubt it. More likely, the world, which assigns different priorities to spouse, offspring and bill collectors, is simply not gaited to accept the writer for what she or he is. That is, the writer and the immediate world will always have difficulty, which is probably just as well; we can't make exceptions in the world's standardized bill- and garbage-collection procedures, can we. Nor should we, or writers would be creating skewed realities.

The point to be made here is that you should probably take a long, and very close, look at yourself now, and genuinely decide whether you want to be a writer or to write as the enabling device for something else.

If you want to be a writer, realize that you will not be able to, and possibly won't want to, socialize with many other writers...or editors or publishers. Those people have very little important to say to you, and a great deal that is not so. You will choose your friends from other fields, having once heard a writer babble about something no doubt important to him, a publisher say that he is going to make you the next Stephen King, and an editor say that your next novel has to be a fantasy trilogy. This is—you will find this hard to credit for the next few years, but trust me—bullshit. You are a lonely, and a proud and rare, individual. You are a writer, and in your head are realities undreamed of by anyone else, and when you walk into a room, everyone else should fall silent, and listen.

Well, that is probably why there are so few writers. Whereas there is a pretty good supply of the rest of us.

Next, we will take up various odd scraps of information. ■



## CHAPTER SIX: ODD SCRAPS



Now that you know how to write—that is, now that you’ve read the previous five chapters—there are nevertheless certain habits you would do well to learn, and certain things you would do well to keep in mind.

Try very hard to establish a particular place where you are going to write. Set up your computer, typewriter, or legal pad and pencil in a particular place, with whatever you need to facilitate the act of writing; a lamp, supplies, a chair—unless you will be more comfortable standing—and allow no one to violate that space. No one—not your spouse, not your mother, not your helpful friend. Clean or don’t clean the space, as you prefer, but allow no one else to touch it, ever. Be absolutely certain in your mind that whenever you leave the space for any reason, it will be exactly the same when you return.

Then, pick a time during which you will write. Pick an hour.

Pick the same time every day. And allow nothing to disturb you. Nothing. You are working, just as if you had gone to the salt mine, and the heavens may fall around you, but you are working. It may take a while to make this perfectly clear to the spouse, the young ones, and the kitten. But you really have no choice. Either you are a writer or you are something else. You will find that even the most agreeable spouse, darling child and cute kitten will persist in their efforts to interrupt you. (Jesus, Honey, I only want a minute of your time!) Be strong; others can solve the problem, or there are few problems that actually can’t wait a little while. You may have trouble believing that yourself, at first. Be strong. After a few days, things will shake into their new routine, and suddenly it will be as if it had always been. (Shh! She’s working!)

I said an hour. One hour out of the day. Pick the hour that’s most comfortable for you; experiment until you’ve found it. And sit at the keyboard, or stand at the legal pad, or whatever, with the full intention of writing something, whether you have anything in mind or not. And stay there for the full hour, with no other intention.

The late James Blish did that. He was basically a medical PR man, and he worked very hard and well at it for many years, for the top accounts, at Hill & Knowlton and similar shops. You can get no higher in the profession. But every night when he got home, he sat in front of his typewriter for an hour.



He didn't have to touch the keyboard if he didn't want to. He just had to sit. And some nights, I suppose, that was all he was up to, though truth to tell I doubt it. The fingers begin to flex, the hands rest on the keys, there's a sheet of paper in the machine, and the next thing you know....

Try it sometime. Sit for an hour at a keyboard, and try to keep from writing. Jim turned out innumerable novels, novelettes and short stories, over a period of many years, in science fiction, fantasy, and many other fields. He built, as a matter of fact, a career anyone might envy—and except for the last few years, he did it in his spare time.

I said an hour. In an hour, the average proficient person can type one thousand words. But let's say it's a hundred words. That's 36,000 words a year. That's half a novel. Ten short stories. But let's say it's five hundred words. Let's say after the hour's done, you're on such a roll that you don't stop.

Don't kid yourself. With rewrites and stuff like that, you won't turn out two and a half novels a year unless you're part of a very elect crew. It can certainly be done. A lot more than that can be done, as a matter of fact. But the bottom line is that if you sit at the keyboard for an hour a day, every day, without regard to the number of words you did yesterday, or the number you are sure you will do tomorrow; if you train yourself to do that—and it's not as hard as you might think; try it for a week—you will have a very nice accumulation of manuscript in a very short time.

As I said, lots of things will conspire against you, including things you do not anticipate. There will be times when you just can't get it done—although Frederik Pohl and many others define their workspace as anywhere they happen to be, and simply take a laptop computer along. (Fred works on the basis of a thousand words a day, rather than an hour, but the principle is exactly the same.) There will be times, especially in the beginning, when you will be tempted to tear up what you did the day before. And you will find, I think, that you will amaze yourself with your ingenuity at creating excellent reasons why you can't do it today but will surely make up for it tomorrow. You will rail at the spouse and the kids for not respecting your space and time, when in fact they can plainly see that you don't respect them either. But if you persist, long enough to get through an initial period of systematic experimentation and adjustment, you will produce, steadily, an amazingly large pile of manuscript.

Will it be any good? Of course it's going to be good, if you followed what I said in the previous five chapters. Or at least it's definitely going to be better than four out of five unsolicited manuscripts that go out in the mail every day, guaranteed. And sooner, rather than later, you will be practiced up enough to get notes of rejection, rather than printed rejection slips, and sooner, rather than later, you will make a sale, and after that, the sky's the limit. But you have to get it in the mail to begin with.

The chief obstacle to getting it in the mail is your conviction that it's not good enough. And the chief obstacle to getting it in the mail first to the

highest paying market, and second to the second-highest paying market, and so forth, is your conviction that it's not good enough; if you're going to mail it at all, you'll pick some mediocre market because it stands a better chance there.

Well, as the late John W. Campbell said in relation to his magazine, *Astounding*, "How dare you edit for me!" And there's a lot of truth in that. Most writers have an inexact idea of how good their stuff is. It does not cost that much to have an editor give you his opinion.

There are all sorts of editors, with varying capacities to discern what you intended. But they are always editors—that is, persons who buy or reject. Theirs is the only opinion that counts. Not your mother's, or your good friend's, or another writer's. Do not bother or embarrass those people. Send your story to an editor, who is paid to read it and render a meaningful opinion.

And if you don't like the opinion, remember that it's just one person's opinion. Send it to the next market down the list. Robert Heinlein said it best: Keep sending it out, and don't rewrite unless an editor asks you to (with a definite promise of money if you do the rewrite to the editor's satisfaction). Meanwhile, write more stores. And send them out.

The secret of success in a writer's life is really a firm grasp of the fact that it is a solitary profession; no one else can help you significantly once the basics have been passed on to you. Most of the time, outsiders, no matter how well-intentioned or how earnestly solicited, will only confuse you. Sometimes with very good advice. Good, but irrelevant.

Editors of course can guide you, sometimes by the crudest sort of trial and error, but the thicker your skin, the better. If you keep writing stories, and keep sending them out, sooner or later you will find your editor. This is hard to do; the returned envelopes and the printed rejection slips pile up on your soul like leeches. But if you learn to keep going no matter what, you will almost certainly make it.

As to where you send it, in order to maximize your chances, go to the reference room of any public library, and ask to look over their indices of publishers. These listings will tell you what a publication buys, and lots of other useful information. They won't be exact, because things change between the time an index gets printed and the time you read it, but they are far better than sheer chance.

Incidentally, I personally have had very bad luck sending stuff to a publication I haven't actually seen. There are too many variables that don't get covered in a listing. On the other hand, it's almost impossible to get hold of copies of some publications. On the third hand, that tells you something about them, doesn't it?

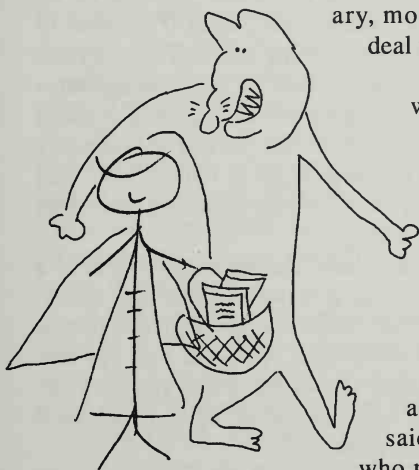
Well, next we'll talk about how to send stories out, and about agents, and that sort of thing. ■

## CHAPTER SEVEN: AGENTS



There is nothing to equal the amount of hushed attention an instructor gets from a roomful of would-be writers when he or she mentions agents. Agents, he—it's me—suddenly discovers, are the single most important thing in a would-be writer's life. And if it's me, he really has to stop everything and concentrate, trying to reason out how this could be, for agents in truth are not that important at this stage. Once you start selling books, you ought to get one. Whether he or she gets ten percent or fifteen, it is more profitable to have an agent than to go it alone. A good agent will do a good job of representing you. But not when you're talking about selling your first few short stories.

But most beginning writers have an idea of an agent in their heads that has little to do with reality. And practically every Yellow Pages printed anywhere in this country has a listing for Agents; Literary, most of which "agents" will do a great deal to encourage those errors.



In truth, I do not know exactly what beginning writers expect of an agent. But it wouldn't surprise me if a certain percentage really did believe that you cannot sell a manuscript anywhere without the intervention of an agent, it wouldn't surprise me if a certain larger percentage believed that an agent's job includes rewriting the manuscripts, and a certain percentage believe that an agent works for them. And, as I said, the Yellow Pages are full of people who masquerade as agents, so the chances are decent that you have had an "agent" tell you these things are true. They aren't.

First of all, no one licenses literary agents; no one examines their credentials, no one can get you redress against a bad agent until he or she breaks a criminal law—which only the stupidest ones have to do in order to rip you off. Most bad agents, consciously or unconsciously bad, have

found ways to do it to you while staying well within, or at least within, the law. Second, any agent you can get at this early stage of your career is an “agent” not worth having.

We’ll get back to that. Meanwhile, it is flatly not true that the editorial world is made up of people who will not read your manuscript unless it is represented by an agent. Oh, there are a few editors like that—there are a few editors like anything—but the overwhelming majority of editors understand that a major part of their job is discovering new writers. If a writer has an agent—as distinguished from an “agent”—he or she is ipso facto already a published writer. If a writer has an “agent,” the chances are excellent the writer has a completely or nearly completely undeveloped talent. If an undeveloped writer has an “agent” who will rewrite the manuscript, for money or for free, the chances are excellent the “agent” is incompetent in that area, particularly if he or she does it for free. Stop and think—if the “agent” knew that much about writing, he’d quit the agency business and go into writing, wouldn’t she? If the “agent” does it for money, the chances are excellent he has someone in the house who has been handed a few simple guidelines—that is, a near-novice writer who is scraping out a few bucks until he or she finishes the novel that will get them away from the “agency.” He or she may help you with a few simple guidelines. But you have been reading this book, you already have those, and a few besides that the reading-fee person never thought of.

An agent agents. That’s all an agent does. The agent knows, because he or she keeps very current, who’s buying and who’s not, and how far up the agent can drive the advance against royalties. He judges if it’s wise to get a high advance. He or she knows what parts of the standard contract can be struck out or modified, and he or she knows what the good royalty rates are. And that’s about all. It’s a lot. A good agent rides the profile of these various things at various publishers at the right time, as near as humanly possible for that agent, and he or she thrills at night to battles won, and cringes at battles lost. She or he does not work for you; he or she represents you; a good agent works for him or her self.

Stop and think. An agent has lots of clients. Rarely in the course of a luncheon does only one writer get mentioned between agent and editor. More: An agent will, if nothing else will do, settle at a lower than optimum rate for you, in order to also sell somebody else. An agent will see that same editor many times, representing many properties, while you are turning out only one. Or do you expect the agent to starve, collecting only a small percentage of your gross and yours alone?

Now. An agent who does the above may not strike you as representing your best interests. And in truth, he or she may not be, in the short run. But he or she is still doing better for you than you could by yourself, in almost all cases, even in the short run. And in the long run, you shouldn’t agent yourself; you should write, and any rewriting is between you and your editor. In the long run, if you do your job, and the editor does his or her job, and the agent does his or her job, you will synergize and do far better than any



of you could have done individually.

That is, when you are ready to start producing books in volume. Until then, an agent can do very little for you. Stop and think: Selling a short story takes almost as much time as selling a novel. What's 15% of the take on a short story? Really, can you expect him or her to work very hard for it?

That is, until you are Stephen King, or someone close to him in sales. Then all bets are off. But not until then.

Picking an agent is an art. The agent who does very well for Writer A may stink for Writer B, and vice versa. The best you can do is look at the work of writers you admire, whoever they are, and, when you meet those writers, ask them who their agent is. (You will meet other writers, almost certainly, just as soon as you deserve to—that is, as soon as you've sold some stories. Trust me.)

Once you have the names of some possible agents, write them a letter. Don't call, don't drop by. Write them a letter, say who's recommending you if someone is, tell them why you ought to be considered. Don't tell them if they'll take you on, you'll be forever grateful, will give them half of everything you ever make, etc. You are just as much an equal party to any possible arrangement as the agent. What you are doing is exploring the possibility that you'll be compatible. And if you're not, on further inspection, then politely beg off and go on your way. An unsuitable agent is as bad as an unsuitable spouse. And that's what the relationship will be, ideally—a species of marriage, with spats and reconciliations, but an enduring relationship nevertheless, with either side giving in occasionally. And as I said, with the agent sticking to agenting and you sticking to writing.

So let's assume that you and the agent have provisionally found each other. Try not to sign a contract. Try to get him or her to take 10% instead of 15%. Try. And if you do sign a contract, first take it to a lawyer with some knowledge of the milieu of literary property, and get him or her to look at it. Pay the \$2.00 to the attorney. This is a business arrangement, no matter how the agent may try to cast it; in fact, the less like a business arrangement the agent tries to make it sound, the less likely are you to be happy in the long run.

Another thing: If you want to break into book publishing, the agent has to be in the New York metropolitan area; if you want screenwriting, the agent has to be in Greater Los Angeles. With essentially no exceptions, no other agent is worth having. Not that you need one, just yet.

Clear? Well, perhaps. Agents are a difficult subject. But if you remember that you do the writing, and the agent does the agenting only, and the editor and only the editor tells you what rewrite he or she wants, you'll be pretty OK. Remember that an agent will not let you use his phone, lend you money, or put you up for the night until you essentially don't need those things; remember that an agent is not your Mommy. For which, if you are smart, you'll be very grateful. ■



## CHAPTER EIGHT: HOW TO DO A MANUSCRIPT



There are many different kinds of editors in this world, and we'll get around to detailing some of the differences. But almost certainly the editor you're most concerned with is the first person to read your manuscript. How do you approach this person to maximize your chances of having him or her pass your manuscript up the line instead of the return mail?

Well, first of all, he—we'll pretend it's me—has the job of going down to the post office box to get the mail. And your impression starts right there; if he has to deal with an outsize envelope, or a #10 business letter envelope, you're in trouble right away.

Budrys' First Law of Manuscript Reading says that nothing publishable ever came out of a #10 envelope. And while this is not quite true—I've bought one such story in forty-two years of slush reading—it's true enough. Too much militates against the folded-over-twice manuscript. For one thing, it's a short-short, almost always. Short-shorts are very hard to write; most that come in by this route are the kind in which the hero and heroine turn out to be Adam and Eve. For another thing, a manuscript folded over twice is hard to unfold and read. It doesn't mean I absolutely won't buy it; it doesn't mean I won't read it; it just means I'll start out with the lowest possible expectations.

Much the same goes for any odd envelope; the 1/2 size, with the manuscript folded over once, and the oversize, with the manuscript rattling around inside. The manuscript envelope to use is 9 x 12", unless you're sending the manuscript from a foreign country (in which case, there are standard envelopes for those nations). If you don't do that, as I say, you've got one strike against you.

And always enclose a return envelope of the same size. Or, mark the manuscript as "disposable," and enclose a #10 envelope for the reply. Also, always enclose return postage, either in stamps or in International Response Coupons. Do not, if you live in a foreign country, put a stamp of that foreign country on the return envelope; the U.S. Post Office won't honor it.

So. Let's assume you have done everything right so far, and the correct envelope has yielded up a properly returnable manuscript. Now we look at the manuscript itself.

Is there a covering letter? I don't know that a covering letter cuts any ice with me, and most just annoy me. I don't care about your affiliation

with any writers' organization, nor about your publishing credits. I don't care about your biography for now, and I certainly don't want a synopsis of the story. I want to read your story; it will tell me everything I want to know about the story, and if I want to know more about you, I will ask for that in my letter of acceptance. The only reasons for a covering letter are if the story is a simultaneous submission—in which case I will return it promptly, unread—or if it has been previously published in some other medium...in which case I will reach a judgement on a case-for-case basis, and thank you for telling me.

You can see, I hope, that almost all covering letters are unnecessary. But some editors like them, and they do not usually do active harm—although the multi-page letter with a list of credits, and/or a full page synopsis of the story, comes very close.

Let me explain something; this attitude has to do with time. There is only so much time in the day, and there are usually a lot of manuscripts. Anything that makes me spend more time on a manuscript, apart from actually reading it, is an aggravation. Your credits do not help you if the story is no good; they do not help you if it is good. And a synopsis of the story is the purest waste of time.

**N**ow, as to the manuscript itself: On the first page, put your check-cashing name and an address in the upper left-hand corner. Put under that your Social Security number. In the upper right-hand corner, put a word count. Not quite halfway down the page, put the title of the story, and your byline. If your byline is different from your other name, I will quickly reason out that you want the story published under the pseudonym and the check sent to your check-cashing name and address.

Start your story halfway down the page, double-spaced—that is, with an open line after every typed line, not with an extra space between words—and done in standard paragraphing. Do not insert an extra line between paragraphs. Leave a margin of about an inch all around. On succeeding pages, put a key word of the title, the last name of your byline, and the page number, in the upper right-hand corner. It's the corner easiest to read, and a page number anywhere else is a real annoyance.

Now, here are some tips:

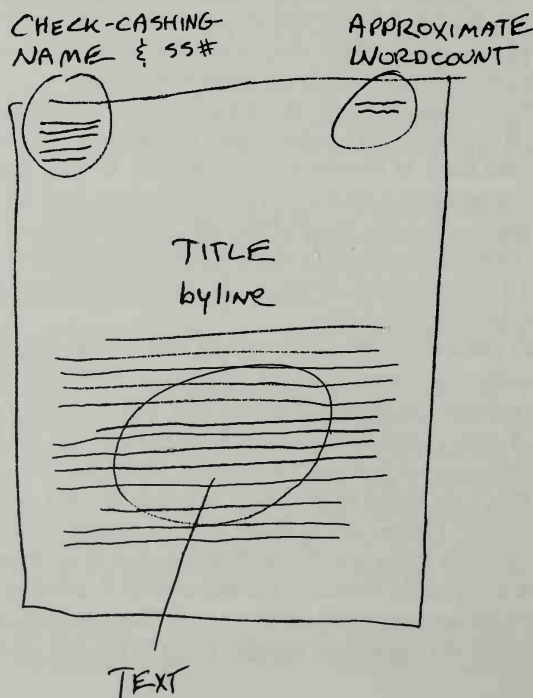
Don't put a copyright notice on the manuscript. You have a copyright, automatically, just through the act of creation. When the story sells, ask the editor to publish a copyright notice at that time. A proper copyright notice contains a date. I know that almost all the stories I see have been seen elsewhere previously—I just don't want to be reminded of it. And do you really think that I am going to put, say, Copyright © 1988, in a magazine published in 1994? I know that some of you are worried about thievery. There really aren't very many thieves, as distinguished from incompetents. But do you think a copyright notice on the manuscript is going to stop a thief?

Don't set up your manuscript to look like a printed page. Don't even straighten out the right-hand margin. I don't care how beautiful a job your

printer can do; give me a manuscript as close to typewritten form as possible. And that includes not setting any italics; indicate italics by underlining. The reason, again, is that anything else is more prone to error in reading, and in typesetting. And make your characters either 10-pitch or 12-pitch; again, your printer may stand on its head and whistle Dixie, but nobody is going to see that. So, please, give me that old-fashioned, clunky-looking manuscript which is, by the way, the easiest to read. And, of course, print it out on one side of white paper. If you are still using a typewriter, by the way, use the cheapest Xerox paper you can buy. Do not, for the love of God, use any of the waxed papers or other fancy presentation stock that people will try to sell you. Please.

And while we're at it—don't place your manuscript in any kind of binder, don't staple it, don't hole-punch it. Leave the manuscript alone; put a paper clip on it, or something equally easy to remove while reading it, if you feel you must. In Hollywood, they dress up their scripts for reading. You're not writing for Hollywood.

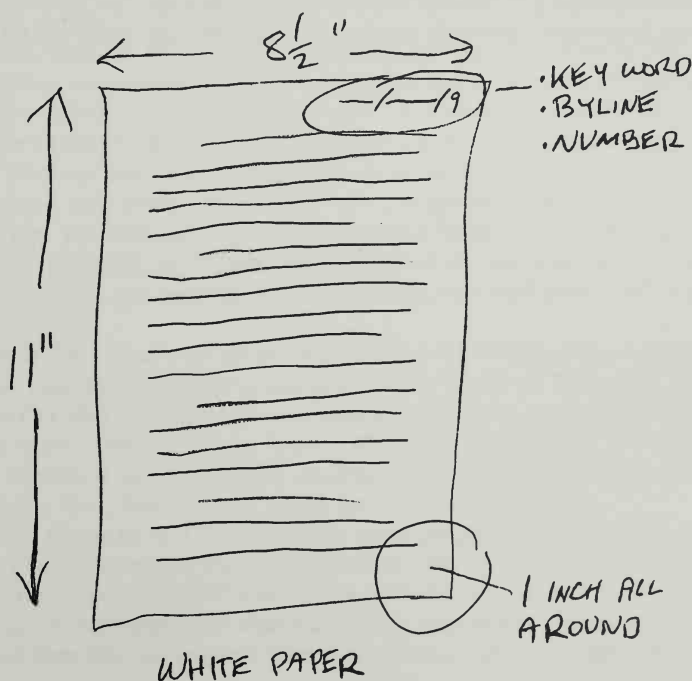
And word-counts—if your computer does not give you a word count, count a typical line by character, not by word. Count everything, including the spaces between words. Then divide by six—the number of letters in the standard English word—and multiply by the number of lines in the story. Put that in the form "Approx. 1234 wds." on the manuscript. Don't be exact. Nobody counts words exactly anymore; all we want is a rough guide to length.



Now—and only now—is anyone actually reading your manuscript. But if you send in a professional-looking manuscript in a professional manner, you are already ahead of a high percentage of writers.

Will I—will any—first reader like the story well enough to send it on to the next editor up the chain? Well, if you have done what I suggested in the previous chapters, the chances are excellent. And that makes you a rarity; most slush manuscripts—that is, most unsolicited manuscripts—stop right with the first reader. But if you tell a story, with a beginning, middle and end, your manuscript will go up the line. If it is good, the manuscript will be bought, provided it is of the sort the magazine needs. Most magazines have narrow guidelines, and it is well to obtain them beforehand if you are not familiar with the magazine. It is also much likelier that you will sell to the magazine if you are familiar with it.

Now: In the old days, magazines had only the first reader, the editor-in-chief, and perhaps a separate managing editor. The ME was responsible for keeping track, the editor-in was responsible for buying, and the first reader got sent out for coffee. (There was also an art director, and copy-editors, but let's not complicate matters.) My magazine, *Tomorrow*, operates with an editor-art director and a production manager (whose duties are much broader than most production managers'). Most magazines nowadays



have a bewildering variety of assistants and several tiers of departments, with the ME, for instance, in the production department and the editor-in-chief acting as the outside good will ambassador as well as doing the buying. The assistants read, prepare memos on what they've read, submit the memos upstairs, etc. In book publishing houses, the top editor rarely reads; he or she, usually acting on memos, sells the book to the sales force, convincing them it is worth publishing.

This means that in most modern magazine editorial shops, and in all book houses, your manuscript may take a long time to process. And particularly in a book house, it will constantly be pushed onto a back burner because book houses always give priority to agented manuscripts... since agented manuscripts mean the author is at least reasonably competent at writing books that will sell more copies when pushed by the sales force, whereas you, the total unknown, however good as a writer, are an unproven quality in the market.

So be prepared to wait a long time. If you haven't heard from a magazine in six months, then write and inquire, politely, enclosing a postpaid envelope for the reply. If you haven't heard from a book house in a year, do the same. Always be polite, no matter how tempted you are to be otherwise. And don't call on the phone.

I read a lot faster than normal; so do a few other editors, but the situation I have described above is the usual. You will run into peculiar editors, particularly among the young, and you will run into peculiar situations, but by and large what I have told you is true. And that's the best I can do. ■



## CHAPTER NINE: REVIEW



I think it's time to review.

In Chapters One to Three of this book, I told you how to write a story; the seven parts that must exist in order for a piece to be a story. This is as plain as day. It is, in effect, merely a definition. It excludes such other constructions as the jape and the slice of life, which I did not say were lesser forms. I said they were scarcer, and they are. Fortunately, most readers apparently want stories most of the time, or at least will settle for stories. So that is what I addressed.

Although a good jape is very apt to be memorable, since the entire situation can be summarized in a short paragraph, as I said before (A) good japes are scarce, and (B) if they weren't, and entire magazines could be routinely full of japes and nothing else, readers would be overwhelmed by a plethora of last lines. A short story mirrors life more realistically, and life is what we are about, in the end.

And I told you how to write a story because that is the place to start. As time passes, and proficiency grows, you can explore a number of other constructs—in fact, you will hardly be able to resist the impulse, and you shouldn't resist it. But first learn to write a story, with all seven parts out there. Because until you do, you will not in fact be confident of anything, though you may think you are. You will find pieces suddenly falling apart under you, you will come down with Dreaded Writer's Block, and you will wish yourself dead, in extreme cases; worst of all, you won't know what's wrong... unless you remember that I told you, way back there at the beginning.

With that said, I went on to Chapter Four. And Chapter Four sprang on you the idea that not all the seven parts had to be clearly delineated in the manuscript; that they only had to be present in the story, and the manuscript, I said, was not the story. And it isn't. The manuscript is only the written-down version of the story, and its purpose is to guide the reader into experiencing the story, large parts of which may occur off the page.

This seems to be a little hard for some people to understand. I don't know why. I cited examples—John Collier's "The Chaser" and Roald Dahl's "The Man From the South"—which are genuine examples of the story told sideways or backward, and with parts of the manuscript missing, as distinguished from Damon Knight's "Not With a Bang," which is a jape, and writ-

ten down completely, as all japes must be. It follows, after all, that if the manuscript is not the story, this could happen on purpose. It does happen, in the case of nearly every one of the truly masterful short story writers—besides Dahl and Collier, and Steven Vincent Benet, such living masters as Bradbury and Ellison, Wolfe and several others.

But not at first. At first they, too, put out all seven parts plain to see. It's an evolutionary process. And it's not necessary to be more subtle, if all you want to do is sell stories for the rest of your life, making a pretty good living. In any case, as I do not seem to tire of telling people, learn to walk before you set off at a gallop.

With that out of the way, I told you that writing is a lonely profession. This is a cliché, as you know, and the tendency is to nod at it without really examining it; one of those truisms you absorb before you really know enough to understand it. But you should examine it; no one else can write your stories for you, and in the end no one can advise you. People can give you the basics—as I have done—but once you start to write seriously, you are following your own individual track. You may go hither and thither looking for advice and encouragement, and it may make you feel good for the moment, but the advice, sound as it may be, will only confuse you. Why? Because that makes the story less than your own. And once you have incorporated the advice, somehow, you will find that a few pages later you will have to get advice again. You have lost touch with the story. And eventually you will come down with Dreaded Writer's Block. Most cases of Dreaded Writer's Block come on when you forget that writing is a lonely profession.

I told you, too, to pick a place where you will do your writing, and a block of time which is inviolable. There is hardly any crisis in the household which cannot wait a few hours, or that someone else cannot solve. This seems unlikely at first. Trust me. Only if you give in to the various demands, and thereby demonstrate that you don't respect the time either, will it remain a problem past the first week or so.

Then I told you about agents—it's a marriage, not indentured servitude, with all that that implies—and I told you about editors. I didn't tell you all about agents, or about editors, because no one can. Somewhere, at this very moment, an agent or an editor, or both, are doing something you would swear was impossible. And the same goes for writers. It's a business with people in it, and people will do things that are neither advisable or rational, just because they're people. Only in fiction do cause and effect work well enough for a mere human to follow. Whatever happens, don't take it entirely to heart; life's too short for that kind of preoccupation.

You will find, in the preceding eight parts of this message, everything that forty-two years in this business have taught me about this business. Some of it is only there by implication; the parts that are plainly said will suffice to launch your career if you follow them, and the rest will come clear as you go along. I have no reason to lie to you, and I have tried, very hard, to pare each section down to plain language and as few words as possible.

And now I am done. ■

# Appendices



# IDEAS...

## HOW THEY WORK

## AND HOW TO FIX THEM



**Y**ou want to remember that “writing” does not involve actual encoding until a very late stage in the process of converting a story into a manuscript. Most of your education has been devoted to teaching you skills which apply only to that late stage, so this may be a little difficult to see. But the fact is that refining your prose style, your characterization, your dialogue-writing, and all that other good stuff on which you are encouraged to concentrate, has little or nothing to do with making you a good writer; it has to do with equipping you to be a writer’s secretary.

“Writing” is founded on a non-verbal process: Ideation. Ideation (horrid word) is what we have come to call the process of finding meaningful arrangements among the chaotic inputs that impinge on the consciousness. The Universe is constantly pelting everyone’s sensory apparatus with inputs. An artist—more specifically for our purposes, a writer—is someone who is less resistant to inputs than most individuals.

Less resistant. Not porous. Someone who lent equal attention to all inputs would be the most advanced case of autism ever observed. We all have mechanisms, visualizable as gates, that function to in effect assign a series of values to incoming data. Some of these are genetically determined: Without fail, any object moving toward us claims more attention than a stationary object; among such objects, the one that will reach us first claims the first attention. We are animals, and in order for our genes to have survived to this advanced date in the history of life, certain elementary survival discriminations have had to be encoded within us, to the point where they are “reflexes.” But in organisms as intelligent as humankind, which undergo a long process of education in the course of an extended childhood, each of us develops a complex superstructure of self-imposed gating systems to which our DNA can only predispose us and which are for the most part the result of individual experience.

Translation: You are what you were. Physical survival aside, the choices you make and the values you assign in maturity—your “personality”—rise from previous experience. If Pavlov was entirely right, even the most intellectual constructs arise from memories of simple reactions—pleasure

balanced against pain. And the evidence appears to be that he was at least right enough to be close enough for jazz.

All right. There are certain minimum requirements. (A) You have to have enough intelligence to recognize an input. (B) You have to accept the input. (C) You have to process the input. These are the first three gates, and immediately beyond Gate C is where the artists are separated from all other organisms.

Exactly what happens immediately beyond Gate C is something so complex that we have had to found the entire science of psychology in a thus far only partially successful effort to understand it. But observation indicates that many organisms have been educated to process all data at this point only into storage bins with lawful values. This is "sinful," that is not; this is "good," that is "bad"; this is "allowed," that is not; etc. A few organisms, however, appear to move data into a different set of processing gates, and the sign over that establishment reads Conditionally Valid. In other words, artists have a Gate *Da* and, in addition—blush to admit it—Gate *Db*.

Mind you, we are looking at an idealized schematic, and the major thing we want to impress upon ourselves at this point is that there are probably no individuals who sent everything through Gate *Da* to the complete exclusion of Gate *Db*. Or vice-versa. Kindly old Ivan Petrovitch Pavlov wouldn't allow it. We all harbor criteria for identifying the sinful, bad, and unallowable, even though we may also harbor a bin in which the use of those particular terms causes us to bridle, thus finding it sinful to speak of sin, so to speak. We all have a *Da* in our head, and we love it; it is the gate that determines we are living right.

So there are people, even in the arts, with gates that are forever closed, or at least very strait, and the difference between artists then occurs first in what passes through Gate *Db*, and then in the system of gates beyond it. Each of these gates subsidiary to *Db* represents yet another opportunity for finer and finer passes at conditional sorting, and in some cases what finally finds a conducive environment beyond Gate *X* may be a very small residue indeed. And it is that residue, and only that residue, from which are made the writing syntheses we call "getting an idea."

What is an "idea," after all? It is an arrangement of data. (*Vide* Paragraph 2.) And unless you are prepared to believe there are Muses, and that they ferry-in some sort of extrasensory packages from some metaphysical soup vat, that is all an idea can be. If you relegate the Muses to where they seem to belong—as a charming explanation for a gating system so immense and interconnected that it can create the effect of unbidden "inspiration"—then on the face of it any arrangement of data is an idea, and no idea is better than another.

We ought to be buried under a flood of ideas, each of us. In a sense, we are. But in order to be able to act purposefully, as distinguished from reacting to everything, we find ourselves "intuitively" assigning values to ideas. I.e., some ideas "excite" us and most ideas don't; in fact, the gating system



sees to it that the vast proportion of things someone else might see as exciting ideas don't seem to be ideas for us at all. They never pass through our particular Gate X.

In this view of things, such recognized phenomena as writers' burnout, writers' block, and the persistent appearance of half-ideas or ideas that excite but then fail to sustain followthrough, are seen as Gate X failures. Thus, the same mechanism that gives a writer's work its distinctive signature is the mechanism that can sooner or later prevent a writer from writing. In the initial stages of a writer's career, the bin beyond Gate X can be full, crammed with all the idea-material accumulated up to that point in the individual's life. But in the writing of stories from those ideas, the bin can empty faster than the gate refills it, and a point will be reached at which the writer comes up empty.

Then, too, the writer's life is of course continuing, and may come to include experiences that crucially restructure the gates intervening between A and X; failure at X may actually be a diversion of the customary flow from Gate W, or from any preceding gate. For the beginning writer, the glitch may be caused by the fact that the whole system has barely been installed and hasn't yet been debugged.

Different prescriptions suggest themselves for different causes of Gate X failure. Taking the causes in the order of simplicity—and thus working our way toward the situation of the beginning writer—these include:

(1) Death.

(2) Organic defects in the brain short of death, which require the intervention of a neurologist. These may produce intermittent flashes of genius alternating with periods or areas of shut-down. They may, in the case of a stroke, close off the creative faculty permanently, or, in the case of senility, produce organic changes with the effect of deteriorating the gates' discrimination.

(3) Habitual drug-use and (4) habitual use of alcohol. Here we get into the first orders of failure for which unaided self-help may be effective.

Uppers burn new tracks in the brain. Most of these are extended feedback loops.

Downers—and here we're most particularly talking about grass, no matter what it says in the pharmacopia—devalue the gates.

Alcohol, the old writer's friend, besides being a downer, also increases the rate of flow through the gates.

Thus, a judicious use of these substances *might* rehabilitate the flow into the bin beyond Gate X, and in some cases has. But while there are individual cases in which it might pay a writer to become his or her own pharmacist, this is far more often the problem and not the therapy. The younger the writer, the less likely that the pharmacy knows what it's doing with respect to creativity.

Most boozy old writers who nevertheless produce well do their drinking only at the ideational stages, and ruthlessly review the results while

sober. Few writers who survive into a matured career do other drugs as a regular thing. Habitual use of grass and hash completely destroy the self-critical faculty; all "ideas" are equally valuable and exciting, all execution of those ideas is equally deft, and thus *Cannabis* is the artist's deadliest enemy; deadlier than speed, deadlier than acid, deadlier than organic death.

The body—and thus the brain—accommodates fairly well to alcohol, in the sense that the degenerations proceed with some sloth in most cases, and may be artistically preferable to constipated sobriety. No such "saving grace" applies to even minimal *regular* use of other mind-altering substances. And it makes no sense to me to resort to any of this stuff before you know the mind you're attempting to alter.

(5) is not knowing the mind you're attempting to alter. It is the big general problem that affects all of us to some extent at every stage of our careers, but it follows that the less writing a person has done, the less that person knows the aspects of her or his mind that are concerned with writing. Putting it another way, such persons don't know the way to their Gate X, and thus cannot find the bin beyond it.

You say you don't do drugs. But we have left that aspect of mind-alteration. Training—that stuff you're doing when you crank out draft after draft, and delve endlessly into your stories and the stories of your friends and other writers—is also mind-alteration, by a less tendentious name.

**T**he mind is the thing, housed in the brain and its extensions, which constantly scans its horizons and tells itself what it sees. It follows that a young mind does not "see" as well as an older one, unless that older one be jaded, because it has accumulated fewer resources with which to interpret events on its horizon. This applies not only to the accumulation of all data, but of data specific to the facility for making interpretations. It's not just a question of mis-routing, in other words; it's a question of dealing with less than maximum efficiency in moving the data through the gates. And the latter problem proves to be the one most young writers concentrate on, because it's the one the educational establishment encourages them to concentrate on.

Gate Y is "Getting it into words," and Gate Z is "Getting it into the right words," so if nothing else the constant process of drafting and criticizing does create facility in moving things through gates. What this concentration on one aspect of writing may do, however, is overlook the importance of the preceding need to promote maximum awareness of routing.

Data-routing problems are caused by not knowing what to call something, by not knowing where to send it after you've given it *some* label, and by not having a gate at the address. Look:

John strikes Henry, and what do you care? What is it about John, and Henry, each, that thou art mindful of them; what is it about John's action and Henry's reaction, what is it about the manner and/or the tool John employed, what is it about the physical effect on Henry, about the (presumed) psychic effect on Henry, and in what way do you care about how

this may affect who eventually rules the Sevagram? At the same time that you have a representational picture in your mind of John striking Henry, you are also creating a tree of branching possibilities—a flow chart, if you will. But it will always be a lesser tree than the master chart of all the gates and routes in your mind; as you picture John with, say, dark hair, a limp, red clothes and a parakeet on his shoulder, you foreclose all the branches dependent on his having a different appearance, which would give him different values.

And when you get to the verb, empires and meta-empires of possible meaning are left unentered this day, because there are people who strike and people who never strike, and within the domain of those who strike, there are those who strike for good cause and for bad, and within those who strike for good cause there are those who strike for sex, those who strike for food, those who strike for shelter, and on, and on, and on...still twined, somehow, around the branches which proceed from Henry.

One of the usual causes of failure in the novice story, of course, is precisely here—in a failure to keep John connected to Henry. But this essay is not a discussion of how to write; it is a discussion of how ideas flow and how to flow them, so we are best off dealing with the fact that someday you will think of John, but you won't know what he has to do, or whom to do it to, and you will realize that for some reason you care, but you don't know what the reason is. You are "blocked."

A true block will not yield to deliberate review of storytelling principles. It is useless to ask yourself "Why is this happening to John on this particular day and what makes it the most important thing that has happened to him thus far?" if you don't know what "this" is. You cannot ask yourself what plausible but failing effort he might first to his problem if you don't perceive a problem. All you can see is John. If you're lucky. It may be that all you can see is a sheet of blank paper confronting your feeling that you ought to write something.

In other words, you may not have any ideas at all.

But this is absurd; the world is full of ideas. You can demonstrate this to yourself by having some other writer complain to you that he or she has no ideas, or doesn't know where a particular idea is going. Immediately and freely, possible and apparently quite plausible developments of some immediate cue or the other writer's half-idea will occur to you. But you can't write them because they're not "yours," and the other writer will prove to be unable to write them, because they're not hers.

Oh, yes, John Campbell often said the air was full of ideas, which he gave to other writers. One, he never wanted them back in the same form he gave them, and Two, he gave these ideas to a hundred writers and got back two or three stories, some of them from people who had deliberately suppressed Gate X in favor of Gate Xa, beyond which the hacks live, and who furthermore had installed a bypass, labeled Easy Street, between Gate C and Gate Xa; it was the vision of the check that excited them and gave the "idea" its values. You're not old enough to use Xa.

The world is full of ideas. But the only ideas you can use are the ideas gated in from the world your mind sees. It follows that what you must do when the bin is empty is re-examine your world, which may very well entail a re-examination of the system of gates. This will proceed much more fruitfully if you have already examined them even once in your life.

I don't suggest some schizophrenic recapitulation of the Sorrows of Werther. That is called Flying up Your Own, a particularly recomplicating form of pain-pleasure which is in any event already occurring among the feedback loops in a dark chamber your mind keeps for that purpose. That is your legacy from the fact that you have only a share of the world, and entered it to find that there were any number of capable organisms already well established in their ideas of what the world should be, and fully prepared to enforce them on you. It comes with the territory for all of us, not just for us writers, and is the principal reason why most people promptly carpenter-up a Gate *Da* and keep its hinges oiled.

Rather, I suggest that the best artist is the artist who has either come to terms with what he or she finds important or has never had to come to terms with it. But those happy latter few don't include you...or me, for that matter, although, like you, I have enjoyed extended periods of just sailing along. Sometimes objectively doing what I think I'm doing, sometimes living in a fool's paradise, but in either event, sailing. And only gradually realizing that somehow balls of glue are accumulating on the feet, or else waking in that awful moment when one realizes one crashed a few moments ago.

Again, in a how-to-write discussion, this is where perhaps the best advocacy is to advocate firmly applying the seat of the pants to the chair, the fingers to the keyboard, the falling into the pre-set routine of body movements that re-trigger the temporarily interrupted circuits, etc., etc. But sometimes this is not where the cure lies, and for writers who have never produced any substantial body of completed-and-published work it is, too often, not where the cure lies. There is not all that much to be gained from endlessly retyping the equivalent of Qwertyuiop, and in the case of established writers this is sometimes true even when Qwertyuiop continues to sell for them if only they can bring themselves to strain it out one more time.

The mind, you see; you *are* your mind, and the aspect of your mind that is devoted to systematic play with ideas in the intent to publish is only one branch of your mind. When it begins to hunt in bewilderment, ask it "What do you mean, 'publish'?"

Well? What is "publish"? It's a verb, and all verbs lead into massive branches of the gating system.

Nah, who are "you"? Are you addressing yourself as you are, or some younger self? Pay not so much mind to what happened to that younger self in the gross exterior world, and more to what ideas it may have formed on the subject of what a writer is, what the world expects of a writer, and what you expect of a writer.



Talk to yourself like a friend. **Never mess with a winning hand**, but if a bad time has come, if the problem is not with the story but with the person trying to continue or commence being a maker of stories, then it's time to give your best friend a bed and a blanket, and opportunities to talk.

What was publishing when you decided what publishing was? Self-exposure? The punch that wiped the playground bully's eye? The gorgeous uniform? The cenotaph? An aphrodisiac? The thing that would finally get your loved ones to Shut Up? Three squares a day and a sixpack? Your very own flameproof wings? Whatever it was, is that what it is? What is your world, and what do you really care about that's in it, now?

Ask yourself if you know the difference between writing and being a writer; if you detect any difference at all, ask how much of what you do is role-playing as distinguished from work.

What is a "writer"? (Nouns also have sonorous resonances). Is a writer someone bent over a bookkeeper's table in an attic, wielding a quill pen, peering through half-glasses, inditing mellifluous passages, scholarly and crabbed, peruked? Is a writer leaning against the zinc of the *Deux Magots*, all brave in his tweed and leather patches, exchanging pleasantries with Jean and Jacques, chucking Clothilde under the chin? Is a writer lounging beside a swimming pool, languidly responding or not responding to a series of urgent telephone calls from Jack Warner? Is a writer walking secretly down the corridors of power, dancing on air, addressing the Nobel audience, inspiring the masses in their triumphal charge upon the barricades?

It behooves a writer, now and then, to sit under a tree, either literally or figuratively, and ask these questions, and all the other questions that proceed therefrom. Not to stroke one's self, you understand, but to find what is there that might have been, but now won't be; to think on what you want now, to listen to the gates closing and other gates opening. No one else can either ask or answer these questions for you; not the wisest person in the world, only the most personal person in the world. That's what they mean when they call it a lonely profession.

Ah, but when an upstream gate opens...what a profession! ■



# WRITING SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY



Technically, science fiction and fantasy—lump them together as “speculative fiction,” and call it “SF”—are a bit harder to do well than general—“descriptive”—fiction is. But not that much harder. Furthermore, the difference doesn’t come into play until fairly late in the process of learning how to do fiction at all.

Considering that the creation of fiction predates the writing of history, you would assume that learning its techniques is a process that has been refined over the centuries and is now readily graspable by anyone of at least average intelligence.

Not so. Most people become writers despite being encouraged to go about it in a confusing and tortuous way.

One way to get a stone elephant is to take a block of marble and chip away everything that isn’t part of an elephant. That’s also a way to produce a notable quantity of gravel, especially since most apprentices will go through several repetitions before they understand the animal passably. There we see why novice writers are apt to be eyebrow-deep in elephant chips before they attain professional publication.

So we get a useful indication of why the final stages preceding success must usually consist of un-learning. The fact is that trial-and-error can hardly be the best possible method, but most of the instruction and advice directed at novice writers boil down to variously subtle, often effective veneration of it.

Being a publishable author is not that difficult a thing to sustain. For instance, it’s obvious from looking at what’s on the best-seller lists that a high level of literacy and a close approximation of life are not required for attracting legions of enthusiastic readers. And in examining the works of “classic” authors who are still being recycled to the public, it’s clear this has always been so. There’s also something to be learned from the fact that Shakespeare, a consummate melodramatist, plays very successfully in Japanese, as well as any number of other languages quite foreign to that English in which he turned so many apt phrases. It isn’t language per se that seizes and holds the audience, nor is it deft syntax. It’s something called “story,” which exists almost independent of its wording

and—go look—often proceeds without very accurately depicting what people actually do or how they do it.

Storytelling, as distinct from the other known forms of fiction, is the time-proven means of attracting the largest audience. Furthermore, the prevailing tradition in modern SF has educated most of its readers to expect a “story,” as distinguished from a vignette or a jest. And so it seems logical for a beginning writer in search of an audience to learn the fundamentals of storytelling, however he or she may depart from them later...although all the work done over the millennia since Homer has not sufficed to exhaust the possible subtleties and power inherent in the story form.

Story affects the reader through a balance between an engineered series of events and an artful depiction of what they mean to the characters involved in them. Without the art, the engineering is empty hackwork. Without the engineering, the art can't be communicated clearly.

The chances are overwhelming that almost all the instruction and advice you've ever received on writing has concentrated on composing words. Good; you are going to need a sound grasp of what words mean and how they link themselves into effective sentences and paragraphs. But writing does not primarily consist of stringing words together, as Japanese Shakespeare proves. Writing primarily consists of forming a series of events in your mind and somehow transmitting them into the mind of the reader. Writing things down in letters and words is a traditional way of accomplishing this transmittal, but stories exist in illiterate cultures, and there was a time when all cultures were illiterate. Nevertheless, stories are “written” in those cultures, and somehow “read” by their audiences. Stories are also transmittable through staged drama, but audiences do not read the scripts and screenplays; they observe the events. Similarly, some forms of the graphic arts are storytelling forms. Consider not only the comics, with their sparse dialog and captions serving mostly to string the graphics together, but such things as billboard photographs, greeting-card art, and paintings like “Custer's Last Stand.” Looking at them, a “reader” finds a story forming, and reacts to its significance.

The reader does this by comparing what the eyes can see to everything like it the reader has ever seen. The reader's mind supplies the crash of gunfire, the whinny of the horses, the outcries of living creatures locked in mortal combat, the baking summer heat and the stench of sweat, gunpowder, and spilled blood. There was no way the artist could have put them into the mute canvas. What the artist has done is provided the reader with cues that stimulate the reader's search through his or her own experience, and the selection of what the reader finds most appropriate to the depicted situation. Similarly, what a reader of words sees is marks on paper; the reader's experience turns those marks into words, and those words into events. Encouraging the reader to create particular events is, by some slight margin, more important than which particular

words you choose to write down, and, by some slight margin, more important than the elegance with which you do it. The first purpose of a chair is to enable someone to sit in it; the carving of the wood, the comfort and color of the padding, are by some slight margin subordinate to that purpose.

So un-learn the idea that the words—the “style”—are what makes writing. What makes writing is your ability to arrange imagined events purposefully, transmit them, and transmit their meaning. When you do this as efficiently and engagingly as possible at the time, your personal “style”—whether it be in prose, words and gestures, or telepathic image-modules—will emerge automatically.

All right, how do you arrange imagined events purposefully? The most direct way is to follow a leading story-character through a chronological sequence of happenings. The first happening introduces the character, and the last happening reveals the character seen in some crucially different new light. In between those two ends, you place the minimum number of happenings required to achieve this alteration. This string is called the “storyline.” The story’s various events, or scenes, occur along this line.

If you wrote out a description of each of these events in order, you would have a detailed outline of the story—a “scenario.” Events in a scenario occur at points along the storyline as it progresses, like longitude and latitude positions plotted along a vessel’s course on a chart. So the storyline is often called the “plot,” and the creation of individual scenes, and their placement in relation to all the other scenes, is called “plotting.”

Contemporary SF still depends heavily on its mid-century traditions as a mass literature, so very often the “new light” in which principal characters are seen at the end is one having them experience crucial change, and having the reader experience it with them. That is, most central figures in SF are admirably heroic, and discover crucial things about themselves and the world while solving an immediate physical problem, and the next most populous class are the villains who ultimately fail to prevent this.

There are other ways of doing fiction, as can be seen by looking at the minor but strong tradition of pieces with revelatory last lines... “For you see, Darling, as I strip off this outer skin, you will discover that you have come to love a being from another galaxy...” but this mode has inherent limitations that prevent it from ever becoming the most popular, or the most useful to a writer’s career.

So it is possible to launch and sustain a highly successful SF writing career by learning some science or some magical lore and then setting a rather straightforward story against it. Even the other sorts of story can be seen as twists on the basic story. Furthermore, though it is possible to be stupid and clumsy and still do well, it is even more possible to be subtle and craftsmanly in one’s art. And in the long run it’s advisable to be the latter; your books rarely stay out of print for any great length of time, your stories are frequently anthologized, and a nice permanent structure of both royalty checks and reputation builds up to underpin you in bad times. It is even pos-

sible that as a consequence there will be no bad times. This may not seem so important at the beginning of a career. However, few good SF writers die young. (No one knows why this is, but you should keep it in mind.)

Remembering those cautions, let's look at the minimum needed to introduce and establish a strong central character:

Obviously, a character must have characteristics; a specific physical appearance and a particular way of going about things. While it's possible for a master storyteller to handle characters in a variety of indirect ways, my strong advice to a beginning writer is to get that character out where the reader can see him or her plainly, and do it as early in the story as possible. "Haugiser was a wiry man with scarred lips" is not a bad opening line.

But simple, static description will not tell you all of a character's salient traits. Nor will it tell you where the opening scene has found him. So a good second line is "He moved toward the gate as if already beyond the suddenly wary guards; as if in his mind he was even now within the courtyard, and they tumbled dead or maimed on the weathered gray planks of the drawbridge." And a good continuation for the scene is: "Hautereine watched him from the keep; she saw him and the guards come together in a knot, and heard his shout of furious surprise as they knocked him into the moat with the flats of their swords. 'Bitch!' he cried out distinctly. 'The kingdom needs my artifice!'

"'Ah, hero, hero!' she muttered, and turned back from the window to what her counselors were telling her now."

Character is delineated not so much in physical appearance as in actions. And a principal character in motion is automatically someone with a destination. Destinations imply plans and purposes, and difficulties to be overcome. Named characters are automatically interesting. Named characters shown interacting with each other imply the existence of major cross-purposes, which implies that none of them may get to their original destinations, or at least will not arrive by the route they first selected. It certainly promises contention. And so in an opening paragraph a story can set the stage, introduce principal players, and intrigue the reader into going on to see how it all comes out.

But of all these important things to do, the key thing to do is to introduce interesting characters who assert their individualities, or the reader will not care what happens to them. Conversely, if the reader is intrigued by the characters, there will be a strong urge to read on. You will notice that it's not really possible to characterize without also moving along the storyline. Questions that arise as the characters bloom into life are: What in particular does Haugiser want in the castle? How does Hautereine know him, and why, in her position of power, does she not in some way intervene personally in what happens to him at the gate? Or is her apparent nonintervention actually the deliberate response it seems likely to be?

But asking these questions implies that a context and problem are already emerged in the story. We find these characters contending over



some medieval thing; we have an idea of what sorts of thing are possible in a medieval setting, and now we are almost as ready to find out which of these the author will work with as we are to find out more about the characters. We are, in other words, building a bridge over from the beginning of the story toward the middle.

"In the guttering lamplights, Haugiser's apprentices cursed and sweated in the cavern, clambering over the impossible framework, lashing strut-work in wet rawhide, shrinking it with torches, levering portions off the floor while something...wheels the height of a man's shoulders; spoked oaken wheels with knobbed iron tires...was fitted onto blunt axle ends dripping with grease. The stench of men and hide, torchlight and lamp-fat, raw wood, and some other substance, fuming in huge pots along one wall; the hammering of mallets, the imprecations and gesticulations of foremen; and hurry, hurry, hurry while Haugiser pointed here to this portion and there to that segment of the great, hulking thing, his keen voice driving through the tumult to cause action there, re-direct it here....

"Gradually, Hautereine's senses took in the shape of this device as her eyes widened. It had a belly, this creature a-borning, and in the belly, benches and footrails, for men to sit braced while they clutched the ash and iron crankworks that would turn the wheels. Already, as she watched, other swarming apprentices were draping the bent oaken ribs with Haugiser's stone-cloth fabric, and the looming creature was growing its indurate hide, turning gray, taking on substance and...she frowned...plausibility.

"But it was at the snout-works that Haugiser directed the main of his vociferous attentions. There, within the bulbous skull, distended ballonets of sewn-and-tarred hide bulged with the leaden cold vapors hosed in from the fuming pots. There, frost rimed into flower on the ballonets, and there the fastidious layings and un-crimplings of hoses and brazen valvings, there the wrapping of cord around the control wheels before they grew too cold to touch, there the fluted silvery nozzle, as though the device sucked on the bell end of a trumpet and the mouthpiece, disconcertingly, pointed outward at the end of the nearly lance-like flute. There—

She turned away. She could not bear it. 'What do you think of my contradragon now?' Haugiser demanded, plucking at her sleeve, capering pop-eyed, and she tore herself free and fled. 'Hero! Hero' she cried out to the waiting Council. 'He will kill my beast!'"

And so, scene by scene, the story grows. But it is not about a compulsive inventor and a powerful female contending over a dragon. The purposeful accumulation of incidents that further and flesh out the contention along the storyline is what forms the scenario—which is not the story. The story is in what Haugiser and Hautereine make of the incidents, and ultimately in what the reader makes of what becomes of them as a consequence of what they make of it. It is necessary to have the characters do more than walk through the incidents, make motions, and speak lines. It is necessary for them to be alive at the time.



And so there is a name for the quality called "drama," a classical Greek word derived from the verb *dran*, to do, to act. It is possible to depict a living character who does not do or act very much, and the Greek dramatists could accomplish that, but they preferred to reach their audiences through vivid actions by their characters. Communication with a reader is more easily attained by this means, it is part-and-parcel of the modern SF tradition, and I advise you against disdaining it until after you have done some of it in the professional arena, if then.

The ultimate reason for this is that only through vivid action is a character seen to have been fully tested. Stories in which the characters hold long philosophical discourses about the events, and reach intellectual conclusions, may in fact verge on or even attain the ideal of revealing some important truth about life. But they are by definition abstract intellectual propositions, rather than concrete emotional experiences. What happens to their characters may be of intellectual interest to the reader—compelling interest, in some cases—but the experience of reading them is ultimately not different from reading a persuasive textbook. That is, this cannot be what fiction is truly for, since textbooks can and do exist independent of fiction. Thus, the for-you-see "story" reveals itself in the end as an intellectual proposition. It is limited in its ability to give the reader the feeling of having changed what the reader is, as distinguished from what the reader knows.

What you know may be important to your survival as a self-aware, thinking being, but *existing* is essential to that condition. It's in dealing with essentials that fiction fulfills its unique artistic role and provides its readers with the greatest satisfactions.

But if the reader's existence is to change, or convincingly appear to change, as a result of a merger with the existence of the story's characters, then that existence must have a point. And so, when all's said and done, there has to be a rounding-off; a convincing demonstration that all of the preceding events have had significance. This is commonly called "the ending," but does not occur in the last paragraph of the manuscript. In fact, it doesn't occur at any particular place in the manuscript. Usually, toward the end of the manuscript there is a climactic event, in which someone wins or loses definitively; then there is an "anticlimax," or "post-climactic event," in which the energy of the characters is seen to have been drained, and in this last scene someone or something authoritatively validates the worth of the climax, and thus the worth of the winning. This sequence, which is mandatory for satisfactory drama, is the reader's cue to perceive that the story has ended. With the dawning of that perception, every event in the story is reviewed, reassessed, and made to fit a new meaning. So in fact the "ending" begins with the first word of the manuscript, and continues through all the other words until and including the last. The ending is everywhere.

It's important to remember that. It all hinges on the concept of validation.

Validation during the anticlimactic event can consist of the most simple-minded ritual signal, as in "Who was that masked man? I wanted to thank him," uttered over the background cry of "Hi-Yo, Silverrr, away!" and the fading sound of hoofbeats. This only apparently redundant exercise tells the audience that (1) The victims are satisfied the hero has rescued them, (2) That they feel grateful, (3) That the hero sees his service to them as a duty, and thus a service to an ideal, for which it would be improper to receive personal thanks, (4) That the hero is alive and well, and launched in pursuit of the next wrong to be righted, (5) That the world is a better place for such actions, and (6) that this episode is indeed over, and its villain thereby crushed never to rise again, thus re-validating the worth of this sort of hero.

There are subtler forms of anticlimactic validation; Dorothy exclaiming "Oh, Auntie Em, there's no place like home!;" the medal ceremony at the end of the first Star Wars film (and of Leni Reifenstahl's *The Triumph of The Will*), the heroine's gasp as her lover's skin comes off, or the dazed Haugiser, blackened and shocked, reacting to Hautereine as she stands regarding the interlocked monstrosity of dragon and contradragon lifeless on the mutilated plain below: "They have died," she utters, lowering her frost-charred eyelids. "Your monomaniac child and mine." Haugiser extends his remaining hand to touch the faded Stone of Creation dangling in her necklace, and the seemingly devitalized thing suddenly emits one faint spark, then subsides. "While we, my Lady," he gasps from his seared lungs, "must yet live on, in recollection of ourselves."

That last is not quite up to the standard either of "these our revels now are ended" or "flights of angels sing thee to thy rest," but it works the same dramatic work, as does "Hi-Yo Silverrr!"

But you can see from this, I hope, that validating the climax will have no effect if we never saw what the individual events meant to their participants, and if we then can never add up what they meant under the surface. Last-paragraph eloquence will not per se repair that. Eloquence comes not from the words but from what they refer to. So, it also seems reasonable to declare that the effectiveness of the ending is in direct relation to the series of running validations that have linked one event to the next along the storyline, and every action within an event to all the other actions within it.

Put it another way: A science fiction story, however otherwise good, will not be fully good if it contains a starfleet captain whose author is clearly shaky on the difference between a solar system and a galaxy, or who thinks a solar system is perhaps as much as a million miles across, or who thinks a light-year is a unit of time. Obvious gaffes of this sort obviously destroy all trust in their author. But make it something subtler; make it a science fiction engineering-problem story whose solution to the problem is utterly plausible to anyone who does not know the exact Rockwell hardness of the cast-iron frying pan with which the hero improvises the key component. Nevertheless, for a few readers, the story is a disappointment, because

in the anticlimax all those dunderheads are standing around congratulating each other, whereas that reader knows full well their new turboencabulator is inevitably going to pieces unheeded behind them.

In fact, the same thing happens in all forms of fiction, but is particularly prominent in mass-market fiction. Mass-market fiction tends toward ritual; in order to interest the broadest possible audience, it keeps its characters and their problems within a rather simple, rather narrow range. In order to attract intensely interested readers, it purveys a great deal of technical detail and jargon. Thus, in a standard Western there is more discussion of the horse than its rider, in the standard crime story the detective is detached from his procedures, and woe betide the sports-story writer who not only cannot ingeniously turn victory on some abstruse rule of the game but, worse, gets a well-known rule wrong. In all mass-market fiction turned out by technicians, the story is about essentially interchangeable people but a particular rule. (You will recall we do not encourage you to write simply as a technician.)

This situation imposes particular burdens on the SF writer. Speculative fiction, unlike the Western, is not a "genre," although it is often casually called one. But because of the way SF has been marketed since the 1926 appearance of *Amazing Stories* on the newsstands in competition with genre-fiction periodicals, its body of published work abounds with genre trappings—ritualization, jargon, simple plots full of conventionalized events—and readers have been trained to expect the SF writer to do the equivalent of knowing the difference between a rimfire revolver and a cap-and-ball pistol.

But the SF writer's purview is not some narrow slice of time in the history of the West, or an equally researchable segment of social interaction such as baseball or police work. The field of play for speculative fiction is the entire known universe, plus all the scientific and magical explanations of it. It is a world wider than that of "mainstream"—i.e., "descriptive"—fiction. And there will always be readers who know more about some part of it than you do, and who are attracted to reading by genre trappings.

My advice is to never include anything you don't know. This advice is patently sound in genre terms—if your laser works in some way that is known to be out of accord with the laws of the physical universe, or if you do not know the difference between a necromancer and all the other sorts of wizard, you will be scorned for being ignorant of facts. But it is also sound advice in literary terms. Never include anything you haven't thought through. Or you will be scorned for your ignorance of life.

The genre-verisimilitude problem is only a special case of the general literary problem, which is to avoid invalidation of all sorts, in favor of building validation toward the climax. Some readers will never be satisfied, and that probably can't be helped. But with each uncharacteristic act by a character, each line of tinny dialogue, each assertion of rationality when in fact the character has chosen a stupid course into the next event—or a blatantly clichéd one—with each such micro-invalidation, another component

of the total potential readership falls away. Too many of them, and those dunderheads at the end will be uttering meaningless speeches while soberly taking seats on a mirage. At these junctures in a manuscript, editors sigh and clip on the rejection slip, much wearied, and sustained only by the knowledge that they have once again stood between their readers and disappointment, as well as between their paychecks and dwindling readership.

**L**et's work through this:

In SF, it has been possible to dazzle the specialized readership by shifting attention from wooden characters and their obviously concocted personal concerns to the drama inherent in deft use of the laws of science or of magic. But as noted above, in that case you had better have done your homework exhaustively, which is exhausting, and in any case that day is fading into the past.

SF—science fiction in particular—has been cited with some justice for its acceptance of shallow characters with trivial emotions. Accordingly, many professional litterateurs in academe and elsewhere have disdained the field in its entirety and regard its study as frivolous.

The standard defense from SF's intellectuals has been that SF is "a literature of ideas" and that "the idea is the hero." But that's just a fancy way of agreeing with the attack, and furthermore is the same defense Western fans could make. The standard pragmatic defense has been that the most widely distributed new SF after 1926 and before 1958 was done by professional technologists who wrote as hobbyists, their creativity sparked by technological notions that had occurred to them in the course of their day jobs, and their style conditioned by a bent toward abstract problem-solving. In this response to criticism from promulgators of descriptive fiction, the assertion was that these authors were not interested in "doing literature." This defense boils down to "So what?" That attitude has its attractions, but it is simply an aggressive rephrasing of the intellectual defense, and, like it, agrees with the judgment that SF is intrinsically a ghetto within the arts.

There are better responses to the condemnatory propositions of the descriptive-fiction establishment. For example, such works as Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* clearly indicate that while the idea is a central operating part, the standard armamentarium of mass-market SF writing is powerfully capable of exploring the human condition in ways that are forever inaccessible to descriptive fiction. One such example suffices to invalidate the generality of the standard attack, and, since this is not an essay on the literature per se, we can leave it at that; for our functional purposes here, the more important aspect is that if one form of conditioning was imposed on a field, other forms can be brought forward to stand beside it. Clearly, what the establishment scorns for its imbalance between artifice and art is only a portion of what is possible in the literature, and only a portion of what the audience can perceive.

It's also important to remember that the "So what" defense is artistically valid. If the writer does not work offhandedly, and if the audience



enjoys delving into the artifice, then the artifice, like Kabuki theater, has become the art. In SF, ritualized writing has been brought forward through a number of generations of authors, has grown in sophistication with each generation, and finds copious creative validation in such works as William Gibson's *Neuromancer*, with its punning title. *Amazing's* founder, Hugo Gernsback, might have considerable difficulty in recognizing Gibson as a descendant of his, but Gibson's work could not have been created in a universe without Gernsback in it.

However, this stage of your interest in writing is not the time in which to limit your explorations. If you want to become a writer, then insightfully and intelligently try everything; what have you got to lose? Historically in this field, as in all literatures, there are the promising new writers who do very well what has been done before, and there are the writers who validly do what has never been seen. That is, they produce new forms of SF which validate themselves largely through self-consistency rather than by reference to existing models. These become the landmarks in the literature.

Of course, to do that you have to know yourself, know your field, work hard and work smart. It may be that for some reason you will find yourself opting to simply work well for a long period of time, validating your career and garnering those various rewards. And who is to say which of these is preferable, which adds more to the art in the long run, or which more justly bestows honors on its creator? Well, as a matter of fact, you, and only you, are who is to say. ■



# WHAT A STORY IS



**T**he manuscript is not the story. Whether you're the sort of writer who 'discovers' the story while typing its pages, or the sort who knows most of the story's details before sitting down at the keyboard, remember that nothing on the paper is sacred. The manuscript is only a vehicle for making a purposeful series of events appear in the reader's mind. The latter is your objective. Everything on the hard copy should contribute toward it, nothing in the hard copy should be superfluous, nothing should confuse it. Work on the manuscript until it cleanly conveys your story, and then stop.

**Writing is not the reverse of reading.** Most of the rich detail, judgmental commentary and interesting digression you enjoy in the process of reading is supplied by your own mind, drawing on its experience of life. Show the reader what is necessary for a grasp of the events, let the reader overhear only what must be said between characters, and trust the reader to supply the rest, just as you do when you read.

**Tell only your story.** Edit away all the first draft hesitations and coyness that were your means of getting up to speed on the manuscript. Remove every word that would allow the reader to mistakenly construct some other story. You can do whatever you like to get through the first draft; just be sure all of your story is in there somewhere. Then cut away as if you had to pay the publisher by the word.

**Every story is either a short story or a structure of interlocking short stories.** Every principal character has a story of his own, intersecting the stories of the other characters. Not all of every story needs to be shown in full, nor does it need to be elaborate, but it must be there in your mind, so that all the characters are consistently motivated and their contentions with each other are coherent and significant to the reader. Therefore, a grasp of what a short-story is, is fundamental to writing skilled fiction.

**There are seven parts to a perfect short story:**

(1) **A principal character:** the person the story begins with. This person should have traits, that is, visible habits that reflect various important strengths and weaknesses.

(2) **A context;** the time of day and the physical setting, but also whatever else the reader needs in order to be sure of this person's name and place in the world. As you write this in, the reader also should begin to be able to see some traits the character doesn't realize are important.

**(3) The most important problem** this particular person could have. At this stage, it is stated only generally and he may not realize the degree of all-out commitment to which it will lead him: He must slay the dragon, or he must not lose his job, or he must save the day. As the story proceeds, details will emerge. In many stories, there is an 'antagonist' who resists or attacks the first character, who is called the 'protagonist'. The antagonist isn't the problem; the antagonist acts in such a way as to bring the problem to the protagonist's attention. The antagonist is equally motivated; he wants to win what the protagonist must win. They actually share the problem, from opposite sides. Their contending actions will be associated with greater revelations about the problem. and about their resourcefulness and dedication .

**When you have first shown the above three things to the reader, the "beginning" of the story has been completed. You cannot in the course of any other part of the story, violate the "rules" you have just created. If you do, you "invalidate" the story.**

*Note:* The beginning of the manuscript may or may not be the same as the beginning of the story. More experienced writers learn how to tell a story wrong-end to, or to mix the elements in other ways. in order to produce the most dramatic effect. It may very well be, and sometimes is, that the reader does not see the true beginning of the story until the end of the manuscript (or printed version). It may be that you can so craftily construct your manuscript that some of the story never appears literally on the page, but causes the reader to supply the 'missing' parts out of his or her own experience of life as seen in the light of the words you do write down.

Nevertheless, by whatever art, all seven elements must be made to appear in the reader's mind before the story will be satisfactory. And you can certainly do perfectly well by simply arranging your manuscript events in 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 order, with no 'gaps' or transpositions. Even the most sophisticated writers usually do it that way, and many readers much prefer it.

**R**emember, however, that what you show your reader during the beginning, wherever it occurs, establishes the rules, that is, the universe in which the story occurs. For instance, if in that universe the characters are not said in the beginning to have prehensile tails, they cannot suddenly sprout them later when they need to whip a gun out of the antagonist's hand. That invalidates the story.

**(4) The start of the middle.** Here the protagonist makes an intelligent, believable attempt to solve the problem, based on what the protagonist thinks he knows about the situation and his own resources.

**(5) The protagonist's first attempted solution fails.** The problem reveals greater complications which are logical in hindsight. But the protagonist is motivated to persist and draw further on his resources. He tries and fails again and again, and each time the problem unfolds its details in such a way as to engage his resources more and more deeply and more and

more quickly. Now the character cannot help but stake everything on the solution, for to fail is to be obliterated, either literally or spiritually. The character and the problem are both growing, though the character may not realize that.

(6) When the problem is about to become a total disaster, one last gasp achieves either **victory or death**. In order to win, the character must turn away from some old traits, no matter how precious, and emphasize new ones, no matter how undesirably they would have seemed in the beginning. Some last straw happens: something breaks, or something precipitates. In an action story, the villain kicks a dog the protagonist suddenly realizes is the most precious thing in the world: in a more 'literary' story, the 'kick' can be just exactly the right word or glance at the right instant. Suddenly, the character's own idea of the character is shattered; the traits fall into a new pattern. Simultaneously with the climactic physical action, the character displays a new view of the world, grown out of the old one.

(7) **The end.** Here this view must be validated. If it is a true winning view—if the physical action is the equivalent of finally shooting down the Death Star, or winning the garden club award—someone or something must do the equivalent of pinning a hero's medal on the character. If, instead, the character has collapsed, someone or something must show the reader that the antagonist was the hero, like it or not. In either case, this 'someone' must be a trustworthy figure, because the reader must be convinced that the preceding series of trials and errors really has come to a meaningful end.

**Validation in fact proceeds throughout the story.**

Every incident must ring true according to the established rules, every asserted event must be supported either by never allowing it to have an ambiguous interpretation or by having some authoritative figure act or speak with an air of absolute conviction of its reality. Formal detective fiction is particularly good at apparent validation and apparent invalidation. In fact, that is essentially what manor house murder stories are. Their study will repay you with an expert grasp of how validation works. It can be used craftily. But it must be used in some sufficient way, or the reader fails to believe your fiction.

If you intend to go on with fiction writing, I hope you will save these suggestions and refer back to them from time to time as you develop your skills through practice. Good luck to you. ■



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When *Writing to the Point* arrived in the mail the other day, I gave the first page or two a casual glance out of curiosity and common politeness. So then an hour or two later the next thing I happened to notice was that I'd just finished reading the whole thing.

“

Good stuff! Apart from being a good read it's full of sound and useful advice, and I only wish you had thought to put a copy of it in a time machine and shipped it back a few decades. If I could have had it at the time when I was doing my own personal best to break in, with many false starts and little confidence in the outcome, it would have saved me immense grief and perplexity.”

—Frederik Pohl

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