Steam Engine

Time 11

February 2010

Today's women of wonder:
Liz de Jager
Carol Kewley
Lyn McConchie
Terry Morris
Gillian Polack
Pamela Sargent
Janine G. Stinson
Kaaron Warren

in the issue about
C. J. Cherryh
Ursula K. Le Guin
Urban fantasy
The art of editing
The art of writing
and much else besides
If human thought is a growth, like all other growths, its logic is without foundation of its own, and is only the adjusting constructiveness of all other growing things. A tree cannot find out, as it were, how to blossom, until comes blossom-time. A social growth cannot find out the use of steam engines, until comes steam-engine time.

Editorials

Editorial 1: Today’s women of wonder

by Bruce Gillespie

I can’t remember how the idea of a ‘women’s issue’ of *Steam Engine Time* came about. The central article was always going to be co-editor Jan Stinson’s article about the works of *C. J. Cherryh*. We also wanted to feature a cover from Carol Kewley, who has recently been doing artwork for Melbourne-based publications, and on her own website.

What we could not have anticipated was the offer of a long article from Pamela Sargent, one of America’s most distinguished SF writers. I was last in touch with her and her husband George Zebrowski in the 1970s; you might remember that the first edition of *Women of Wonder* (1975), edited by Pamela, contained in its introduction the longest footnote in SF publishing history: the correspondence between Ursula Le Guin and Stanislaw Lem from an early issue of my *SF Commentary*. *Women of Wonder* was followed by *More Women of Wonder*, and later by two completely revised versions of the same books.

If ever Pam Sargent edits *Even More Women of Wonder*, based on the work of the last two decades, we trust that she will derive many of her stories from Australian authors. Not only did Jan and I want to celebrate our favourite women SF and fantasy writers in this issue of *SET*, but we wanted to demonstrate the importance of the vital work that has come from Australia’s current SF and fantasy writers and editors, such as Margo Lanagan, Kaaron Warren, Cat Sparks, Deborah Biancotti, Lucy Sussex, Kirstyn McDermott and Alison Goodman. We present an interview with Kaaron Warren in this issue, but otherwise we’ve still failed in this aim.

Deb Biancotti has a new collection; Margo Lanagan won the World Fantasy Award for her latest novel, and the others are publishing regularly and winning awards. Please send your articles about our writers!

In talking about major women SF and fantasy writers, critics and reviewers tend to think immediately of *Ursula Le Guin*. In the last forty years has become an American Classic Writer. Hence we welcome articles by Melbourne writer *Terry Morris* (about the ‘Earthsea’ books and the Japanese movie supposedly inspired by them) and Canberra writer, academic and critic *Gillian Polack* (about a variety of Le Guin’s works).

We are also pleased to present a variety of comments on more general subjects: *Jan Stinson* on the Urban Fantasy movement; New Zealand writer *Lyn McConchie* on what writing is all about; and *Pamela Sargent* on one of the big questions: ‘Are editors necessary?’

This issue of *Steam Engine Time* is designed to send out one central message: Jan Stinson and I welcome articles and reviews by women talking about women’s writing. We look forward to your response.

— Bruce Gillespie, February 2010
There is no way I can come up with the sort of editorial Bruce has written for the companion issue (SET 12), because I wasn’t paying much attention to what I read, saw or heard during 2009. I remember some of the movies and books, but there wasn’t any music bought. One might call it my own peculiar version of a Lost Weekend that lasted nearly 12 months.

But that sounds incredibly sad, doesn’t it? Well, depression is like that. If you want the specifics on the symptoms of a major depressive episode, or clinical depression, Google or WebMD are your friends. The four symptoms I’ve been battling: loss of energy, lack of interest, sadness, inability to concentrate. I’ve been on medication and in counselling for depression for a year now, and only in the last two months have I finally started seeing what my life was really like from outside of the depression. Yikes.

Fortunately, and thank God for it, my medication works well for me. Might need a bit of tweaking, but I feel like I woke up from a long, vaguely negative sleep. My reading comprehension sucked pre-meds, but with the meds, I re-read books I’ve already read at least twice and it feels like I’ve never read them at all. No idea why this is so; I haven’t had time to research it or ask my PCP (primary care physician) about it yet. I’m still in the middle of it.

What a gift, though. I returned to Peter Watts’ Blindsight and it actually made sense this time. I returned to C. J. Cherryh’s Cyteen in preparation for its 2009 sequel, ReGenesis, and came away from it much less depressed than the first two or three reads. I’ve just finished re-reading Octavia E. Butler’s Parable of the Sower and Parable of the Talents, after reading a for-review book called Between Allah & Jesus: What Christians Can Learn From Moslems by Peter Kreeft. The Butler novels make much more sense now, and I am amazed that the simple beauty of her writing didn’t blaze forth from these novels’ pages the first time I read them. Can I read Hemingway now and not fall asleep? Hmmm

I spent a fair chunk of 2009 looking for movies that would actually scare me. Not a lot of luck there. Paranormal Activity didn’t pass muster, perhaps because I’ve watched too many episodes of ‘Ghost Hunters’ and ‘Paranormal State.’ I haven’t tried the ‘Nightmare on Elm Street’ series yet, so perhaps that’s where I’ll get my jolts. Splatter movies don’t interest me. The best horror film I’ve ever seen is still The Haunting of Hell House.

Being very short of money, I didn’t buy any DVDs, and rented very few from the local video store. I’m sure I’ve seen a lot of movies via my cable system, but I can’t recall them right now. Depression caused me to not give a damn whether I remembered them or not, it seems.

Sadly, I can’t recall the last time I bought a music CD. Meniere’s disease causes deafness in most sufferers, I’m already 90 per cent deaf in my left ear, and I was depressed most of 2009 — not a recipe for listening pleasure. But I finally located the pile of LP records I wanted to save, and if I can talk myself into it, I might listen to at least some of them this year. The major depression fed my negative feelings about having Meniere’s; I can no longer hear music the way I could twenty-some years ago. Now that the major depression is being alleviated (mostly), I grokked that I still have one good ear, and it was silly to deprive myself of something I love so much. And I’ve become a Foo Fighters phan to boot.

Perhaps the greatest challenge in recovering from depression is learning
the various ways in which I sabotage myself into not doing what needs to be done. Now that I recognise these behaviours, I can work to reduce and, eventually, eliminate them. I really, really need to find at least a local part-time job, and I’m scared to fill out applications. Having admitted to myself that fear, I can work on moving it aside and getting those applications completed.

Recognising negative behaviors and learning new ones takes time. I am just as to blame for the fact that SET didn’t get a third issue published in 2009 as is Bruce, and perhaps more so. Granted, there was that long space where I didn’t know what the hell I was doing beyond going through the motions of daily life and faking the rest of it. Let’s just say, shall we, that I’m moving beyond that now, but I’m not clear of the swamp just yet.

Along with other resolutions for the New Year, I resolve to do my utmost to help Bruce get at least three issues of SET out the door before 12/31/2010. Now that I have my reading skills back, I hope to do more writing for this fanzine as well. Parts of ideas that have been simmering in my brain for years are starting to come together in interesting ways. I’ll try to take notes, so I can report on what happened to them at the end of this year.

Thanks to all who continue to read and loc SET. I greatly appreciate it.

— Jan Stinson, January 2010

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**Editorial 3: Urban fantasy on the rise**

by Jan Stinson

For our purposes here, urban fantasy is defined as a fantasy work featuring a contemporary setting in which supernatural rules and entities are real in the human realm (whether known to humans or not), and the main characters are either supernaturals or humans, and are often strong female characters as well. The attitude is by turns clueless, snarky, disbelieving and empowered, depending on the journey the protagonist takes. Some protagonists already know and use whatever supernatural powers they have or are granted, and others come to know and accept them during their journeys. The attitude could also be called streetwise, in some instances, or at least informed with that kind of sensibility. Romance between lead characters can also be included, starting from the beginnings of more intimate relationships to pairings of long standing, and often other than heterosexual. These relationships are important, but not the central reason for the story. Such a definition can, and does, cast a wide net when one gets down to specifics.

*War for the Oaks* by Emma Bull is one of the foundation novels in urban fantasy (if not the foundation novel), in which a female musician meets an elven lord and learns there is more power to music than she ever suspected.

Lori Devoti’s *Amazon Ink* features a woman who was born to Amazons, but rejected their culture and allied herself with the human world; it’s a story about denying one’s roots and being forced through circumstance to change that stance, albeit not reverting entirely.

Damali Richards, the central character of L. A. Banks’s *Vampire Huntress Legend* series, is born to her destiny, growing into it as she matures physically in *Minion* and *The Awakening*, but left free to choose the light she knows or the darkness of her closest friend and love interest, Carlos Rivera.
Justina Robson’s ‘Quantum Gravity’ series posits a universe where humans and supernaturals live together and acknowledge each other, while manoeuvring for more power and control (especially the nonhuman folk), and music plays an integral part in that struggle.

There are others, of course, but the preceding titles are all examples of where individual writers can wander in the fields of urban fantasy.

Kelley Armstrong’s ‘Women of the Otherworld’ series sidesteps the potential for death by repetition (for those who crave the new, at least) by moving from one character to another amid a group of friends and acquaintances, from book to book. Three of this series’ novels feature Elena Michaels, the only female werewolf (known, at least) and a freelance writer on occult-related events. This is a cover for her real job, which is working for her Pack Alpha, Jeremy, to find any ‘mutts’ (werewolves not belonging to any pack) in their territory and keep track of them. Other characters in the series include a necromancer, a half human–half demon, and witches. In all these novels, Armstrong takes lore and legend and remoulds them all into a universe where the supernaturals gradually become known to each other, where some join forces and others plot to take over everything. There’s a reason that Good versus Evil will never die as a plot foundation: it’s something that everyone has experienced at least once in their life, and the larger-than-life strokes in which such conflicts are painted in fantasy are attractive to readers because of the familiarity of the struggle.

C.E. Murphy has two series under way: ‘The Negotiator’ and ‘The Walker Papers’. The first centres on attorney Margrit Knight and her gargoyle lover Alban, the second on Seattle mechanic and emerging shaman Joanne Walker. Bare-bones descriptions of book series as well written as these two do them little justice, but are all that this space allows. I recommend both for their in-depth characterisation, tight rules for magic, and explorations of areas of the supernatural not often featured in much of urban fantasy’s offerings.

This is a brief overview of what’s been happening in urban fantasy since about 2000. There are many more writers delving in these fields, some worth reading, others not so much. I’ve read Kerie Arthur’s novels, and was less impressed with them than with Kelley Armstrong’s work, but for those who like extra spice via sex scenes in their fantasy fiction, they’re certainly on the mark.

So, why is urban fantasy attractive to me as a reader? Fun. Plain and simple. I like the attitude, the action, the complicated relationships, the magic and mayhem. There’s nothing wrong with brain candy that actually has some vitamins, right?

— Jan Stinson 2009
Lyn McConchie lives in the North Island of New Zealand, has published much fiction and non-fiction, and also been a major contributor to fandom in New Zealand and Australia during the last 30 years. The following is a companion piece to 'Losing History', which was published in the last issue of Jan Stinson's personal fanzine Peregrine Nations.

In the middle of 2008 I was giving an after-luncheon talk to a women’s group celebrating their its anniversary. Part of the meeting, before it was my turn to speak, was given over to a reading of the original minutes and the activity of the very first meeting — all recorded in handwriting. The young lady reading this had to leave out portions of the information, as she was unable to read the handwriting in which it was recorded. Over the sections she could read she stumbled often, misreading a word and correcting it as she realised from the context what it must really be. At this point several things occurred to me. The lady was perhaps in her late twenties or early thirties. My generation (in my early sixties) is probably the last generation to have grown up and spent a good half of our life with handwriting. As a small child I even used a pen dipped in an inkwell. In my lifetime, pens have gone from dip pens, to fountain pens, to the ubiquitous ballpoint, but parallel to that has been the progression of manual typewriter, electric typewriter, word processor and finally the computer.

And from now on it is likely to be the computer — in ever improving formats — that is king. But where does this leave old fan group records: the minutes of innumerable meetings, the records of groups that started in the war years or even further back, to the years between wars? It leaves them increasingly unreadable. It takes practice to read handwriting. I’m not talking about the beautiful copperplate script that some wrote — and that at least one old friend still uses. That is legible always since in many ways it is akin to a number of computer fonts.

No, I’m thinking about the handwriting that was written by many who left school at twelve, those whose writing is that spiky angular script that is quite readable still — if you grew up reading it as I did — but the sort of writing that to the next generation, and increasingly to those after that, is quite illegible.

(This problem will also apply increasingly to preserved family letters handwritten by fans or genre writers who perhaps are still not so well known. However, as the years pass, and for various reasons, they can become better known, more widely accepted as influential. But many family letters, written in the 1950s and 60s and preserved by those who loved them, were written in poor handwriting. How many of those, even if they remain, will still be readable by those who were born fifty years later?)

The suggestion that leaped to mind is that such precious records should be brought out and transcribed onto computers. The best thing is to have dual records. The original, and a copy; a printout, so that the precious originals can be preserved, but that they can also be read, understood and appreciated by later generations of fannish writers. And a separate copy of them in printout will as well, save the originals the handling that, as they age, will be more and more damaging.
It is something that few fan groups will ever think about. But there are points to consider. One is that many professionals who are well known now were once amateurs or at the beginning of what would eventually be an illustrious career. They started or belonged to fan groups — often small groups serving their own specific area. They wrote the minutes; they were recorded as objecting, supporting or abstaining from various motions. They proposed, seconded, and acclaimed. And in another couple of generations those who know nothing but computers, the words of such fans will be unreadable by the enthusiasts of their work — or by would-be official biographers.

And what of those who want to propose something based on — or changed from — an early regulation of the group? They may be unable to do so as, while that regulation is known by tradition, the actual tangible record is in illegible handwriting and cannot be read in support — or denial — of the changes or support now proposed.

And then there is the side of historical record. These early handwritten minutes of some fan groups can be invaluable to show how they developed and grew — how conventions or regulations arose, and who was involved in historic decisions. If these records can no longer be read, then we are losing the history of our groups and that would be a great pity.

Which of you belong/ed to small fan groups and know that the group’s early records are handwritten? Can some of your younger members easily read those records? If not, then how much worse will that be in another generation? This is something that I notice at my age. That children who have grown up reading nothing but print find even quite clear handwriting almost impossible to read. Print, yes, they can read that, but flowing handwriting they find illegible.

But there is also a problem inherent in trying to save such history. Many groups may have lost most of their older members for various reasons, and those remaining may not have the time or the energy to sit for hour after hour transcribing the handwritten records into the computer. Yet the younger members can’t read the handwriting to do that job.

I listened to the member of that group stumble her way through handwritten records that dated to 1948, omitting large sections that she couldn’t read, and thought that this is a project for people working by twos: one to read the handwriting, the other to enter it to computer. And if it is done this way I have little doubt that the younger members will find some astonishing pieces of information along the way. At the least they will learn a lot more of their groups’ history and beginnings.

But I fear that while most fan groups will agree that this is something that should be done, few will set out to do it. They will say that they do not have the time, that it is an unnecessary expense. They will protest that a time will never come when they or their successors are unable to read the handwritten minutes. Why, they can read almost every word still. And anyway, their group was small and items will be duplicated elsewhere.

Or they will protest that their group is a major one, so someone will always be interested and able to read the records, copies can be sent to specialist archives anyway, where experts will work on them. They will have a multitude of reasons and excuses — all of which add up to not wanting to do the work. And in a very few more years it may be too late. After that fandom will be the poorer.

— Lyn McConchie, December 2008
Are editors necessary?

Pamela Sargent

Pamela Sargent lives in Albany, New York. She is the author of several highly praised novels, among them Cloned Lives (1976), The Sudden Star (1979), The Golden Space (1982), The Alien Upstairs (1983) and Alien Child (1988). Her novel Venus of Dreams (1986) was selected by The Easton Press for its 'Masterpieces of Science Fiction' series; its sequel was Venus of Shadows (1988). The Shore of Women (1986) is one of her best-known books. Sargent is also the author of Earthseed (1983), chosen as a Best Book for Young Adults by the American Library Association, and the short fiction collections Starshadows (1977) and The Best of Pamela Sargent (1987). Her novels Watchstar (1980), Eye of the Comet (1984) and Homesmind (1984) comprise a trilogy. She has won the Nebula Award, the Locus Award, and has been a finalist for the Hugo Award and the Theodore Sturgeon Memorial Award.

Sargent is also an editor and anthologist. In the 1970s, she edited the Women of Wonder series, the first collections of science fiction by women; her other anthologies include Bio-Futures and, with British writer Ian Watson as co-editor, Afterlives. Two anthologies, Women of Wonder, The Classic Years: Science Fiction by Women from the 1940s to the 1970s and Women of Wonder, The Contemporary Years: Science Fiction by Women from the 1970s to the 1990s, were published in 1999. With artist Ron Miller, she collaborated on Firebrands: The Heroines of Science Fiction and Fantasy (1998). Two collections, The Mountain Cage and Other Stories (Meisha Merlin) and Behind the Eyes of Dreamers and Other Short Novels (Thorndike Press/Five Star), were published in 2002, and a third collection of fantasy stories, Eye of Flame (Thorndike Press/Five Star), came out at the end of 2003. Her more recent publications include 2004’s Conqueror Fantastic (DAW), an anthology of original stories, and Thumbprints (Golden Gryphon), a collection of Sargent’s short fiction, with an introduction by James Morrow.

This essay is based on a speech given at the Science Fiction Research Association Conference in Eau Claire, Wisconsin, on 22 July 1996. Pamela Sargent and George Zebrowski were the Guests of Honour at this conference.

Since I have been the editor of a few anthologies, among other editorial ventures, I should probably argue that editors are necessary. But I am also a writer, and writers and editors don’t always see eye to eye. Indeed, one of my colleagues, George Alec Effinger, has likened the relationship of an editor and a writer to that of a cobra and a mongoose. Which is the cobra and which the mongoose? No one can say.

I recently had an experience with an editor who rejected a story of mine for an entirely unexpected reason. This story was submitted to an original anthology, after letters, e-mail messages, and telephone calls about what I wanted to write for the book. I very much wanted to be part of this particular anthology project, and the editor very much — or so I believed wanted a story from me. This story was a difficult one to write, and I was...
in the middle of moving at the time, but managed to get my story in just before the deadline. The story was exactly the length I had said it would be, was set against the background I had said I would use, and fit the anthology’s theme. I would also like to think that it was a good story, and the editor definitely seemed to think so, but my story was rejected anyway.

Why? Because the main characters in my story were all men, and it seems that the editor already had too many stories centred on male characters and not enough with female protagonists, so since my story mostly involved men, it would have to be turned down or the whole tone of this particular anthology would be thrown off.

Now some might say that there is a kind of karmic justice here, with the editor of the *Women of Wonder* anthologies having a story turned down because its central characters were male instead of female. Indeed, I probably, in my own small way over the years, helped to make such a rejection possible!

Of course, this rejection also provoked some darker thoughts about editors — certain editors, anyway. But it also illustrates a fact editors and writers both wrestle with from time to time: work may be rejected for reasons that have nothing to do with the quality of the work or its literary merit.

What exactly does an editor do? Answering that question presents a number of difficulties. Editors read manuscripts and decide which ones to publish. If a manuscript is publishable but needs work, the editor offers suggestions and works with the author on the text to make the story or book better. After that, the editor shepherds the book or story into print. That’s about the simplest way to describe the editor’s job, but a lot has been left out of this brief description.

Another problem in discussing what editors do is the way in which many editors are hired, and the varying backgrounds they bring to their profession. There are a few people who deliberately set out to be editors, and take college courses or gain other job experience with this goal in mind, but others who seem to have gotten their jobs almost by accident. Early twentieth-century science fiction was largely created by people who were editors for pulp magazines, and whose editorial judgments were formed largely by the necessity to get a certain amount of publishable copy into a specific number of pages by a particular deadline. There are some recent science fiction editors who got their jobs because a publisher wanted to publish some science fiction or to set up a science fiction program and then said, ‘Hey, you know all about that sci-fi stuff, don’t you?’ to someone working in the mail room. Some people
who love literature and who studied it in college have found themselves editing science fiction and fantasy, and others who grew up with the genre as fans have become editors, too. To the author, it can sometimes seem that many of these people are after entirely different things as editors.

Editing is an art. It’s difficult, if not impossible, to set down hard and fast rules about what an editor has to do, or should be doing. In my efforts to shed some light on this subject, I began thinking about some of my own experiences with writing and editing.

As have many writers, I started sending out stories early in life, long before any of them could possibly have been publishable. By the time I was fourteen, I had accumulated a few form rejection slips from *The New Yorker*. One day, yet another form rejection slip arrived with one of my manuscripts, and I noticed that an editor at *The New Yorker* (or an editorial assistant, anyway) had actually written me a note. The note said, ‘You’re supposed to TYPE the manuscripts.’ This was a revelation. I’d been sending them in handwritten on lined paper.

So maybe part of the editor’s function is to aid people who don’t have a clue. But if editors spent too much time on that, given the number of manuscripts that they get from clueless people, they would never get anything else done.

The closest I came to any editorial experience during my teens was being on the editorial board of my preparatory school’s literary magazine. We had to read submissions, and decide which pieces ... and poems that we deemed worthy of publication, we had to winnow those down to what there was room for in our pages.

Some decisions were relatively easy; there were usually a few things that we all unanimously agreed had to be in the next issue. Still, we didn’t want to print too many pieces by the two or three best writers in the school, however talented they were; that would have made it look as though the magazine was being edited by a clique. Sometimes our decisions involved the question of balance; humour was usually hard to come by, and we didn’t want to fill our pages with too many J. D. Salinger pastiches or with too many sonnets inspired by Elizabeth Barrett Brown-
finally accepted, but only, my informant told me, after a fair amount of
argument, a milieu that was completely alien to many of my fellow
students; unlike those of us who were scholarship students, many girls
in this school knew nothing of life in the more rugged environment of an
urban co-ed public school. From that, I learned that a work set in an
unfamiliar setting, or in a world that the reader knows little or nothing
about, is likely to have a harder time winning editorial approval.

Why I went on to write science fiction after learning that, I will never
know. In fact, this is a persistent problem for science fiction editors,
writers, and critics trying to distinguish between truly flawed works and
those that may seem flawed according to certain critical standards, but
which are actually quite original and innovative.

I did not write again for publication, or attempt to pass editorial judgment
on others, until my senior year in college, when two stories of mine were
submitted to science fiction markets and accepted for publication. By
then, I had developed a terror of editors and their judgments, to the
point where my companion, George Zebrowski, had to grab my manus-
scripts from my hands before I destroyed them, and then encourage me
to type them up and send them out.

This brings up another problem in the relationship of a writer to an editor.
The writer is often so close to his work that almost any criticism, even
criticism offered in the most kindly, sensitive and sympathetic manner,
can be experienced as a knife aimed at his heart: yet part of what an
editor has to do is to tell the writer things that the writer may not want
to hear. Still, the editor might be wrong in his judgments. The whole
situation is akin to the relationship of a patient to his doctor. Sometimes
the doctor is right, and the patient should listen; after all, the patient
has to assume from the outset that he may be setting himself up for
unwelcome news. But sometimes the doctor can kill a patient with his
mistakes, and I hate to think of how many stories and books may have
been killed in their infancy by editorial malpractice. There is the example
of Philip K. Dick, who was apparently so discouraged by an editor’s
comments on some of his early novels that he destroyed the manuscripts.

I was afraid to submit my stories to editors because of fear that their
reactions might destroy writing for me. I needed the process of writing
then; indeed, at times it functioned as my psychological lifeline. It was
a lot easier to hang on to that lifeline if somebody else wasn’t judging
what I’d written. Aspiring writers are sometimes advised to find ways to
meet editors who are in a position to publish their work, but I avoided
that. Once I had made up my mind to submit stories for publication, it
was a lot easier to send them to people I didn’t know and had never met
and who knew nothing about me. That way, any rejection would simply
be a stranger’s impersonal judgment — painful, but easier to live with
than a condemnation from someone I knew.

Here we can glimpse one of the trickiest dilemmas facing writers and
editors. The writer may be more deeply wounded by an editor’s criticisms,
or may be too thin-skinned and too quick to reject what might be good
advice, if he knows the editor personally. Anyone who has ever received
‘constructive’ advice from a friend knows this problem. The editor, on
the other hand, is in danger of allowing what he knows about the writer
or having his relationship with the writer affect how he reads and judges
the writer’s work. But to tell the writer and editor never to meet and to
keep away from each other doesn’t really make much sense, and isn’t
all that practical. Given the way the publishing business works, and also
the close bonds most people in science fiction have with others active
in the field, it may be hard for the writer and editor to avoid each other.
Editors are also people, and they will naturally tend to look out more for
writers they know than for those who are total strangers. If the writer
and editor are able to have friendly feelings about each other while also
being able to maintain the objectivity necessary for a good working
relationship, they will probably both be better able to perform their
respective tasks. This doesn’t mean that they have to be friends; maybe
it’s better if they aren’t particularly close. But it doesn’t hurt if they’re
friendly.

Ideally, one should read a manuscript with no thought of the person who
wrote it, allowing the work to speak for itself, but in practice, is this
possible? I recall one story, which came to me secondhand, about a
science fiction editor who had been advised that she probably shouldn’t
get extremely friendly with writers whom she admired and was likely to
publish. Her response was: ‘Does that mean I can only hang around with
writers whose writing I can’t stand?’ It seems that the only way to solve
this dilemma is for the editor to be aware of possible biases and to
compensate for them, and for the writer to develop the ability to
distinguish an editor’s constructive criticisms from possibly mistaken judgments — and not to take either personally.

I have been on both sides of this dilemma, and I’m not sure which person is in the most difficult position, the writer or the editor. It’s painful to read a wretched manuscript by someone you like very much, and to have to turn it down; it’s painful to have someone you like and whose judgment you respect tell you that you’ve written a bad piece of work. But more of my natural sympathies lie with the writer. The editor, after all, is the one with the power to enforce his opinion by turning the story down and refusing to pay for it.

So some efforts at objectivity, on both the writer’s part and the editor’s, are necessary. A writer may not agree with an editor’s criticisms, may consider them entirely wrongheaded, but she has to be certain that they were made with concern only for making the story better, and not to work out some unspoken grudge; then it is possible to analyse them clearly. And the editor has to be sure that the writer isn’t going to dissolve into tears or explode in an irrational rage over every criticism, however severe it may be. (Justified rage against an editor’s completely obtuse or unjust comments is another matter, but I won’t go into that complicated subject here.)

Sometimes a writer is lucky enough to have an editor who seems born to the job. I submitted two of my earliest stories to Terry Carr in the early 1970s. He turned them down, but in his rejection letter commented at length not only about the weaknesses in the stories, but also about what he saw as my strengths as a writer. That letter was one that I welcomed and treasured almost as much as some letters of acceptance, and I learned from it. As it turned out, Terry bought the next two stories I sent him, and gave me some good advice on rewriting one of them.

Another editor who gave me valuable advice in a rejection letter was Damon Knight. His advice was usually terse. ‘People in stories often plot elaborate revenge,’ he told me in one letter, ‘but real people usually have other things to do.’ In another letter, he told me that almost any piece of work can be cut by about a third after the author thinks it’s finished, and Michael Moorcock gave me similar advice. Being a wordy writer, this was some of the best advice I ever got.

When I was beginning as a writer, an artist friend told me never to show a piece of work to anyone until it was finished, or at least until I couldn’t find anything more to do with it. Her other piece of advice was to listen to only one or two people whose judgment I trusted implicitly when seeking criticism. Most of the time, I followed this advice, but the experience of writing my first novel impelled me to ignore it.

As have other science fiction writers with book-length works, I crept up on my first published novel, Cloned Lives. I didn’t start out intending to write a novel; my earliest writing about the characters in the book was a short story, and I assumed only that I might write a few more such short stories.

One of my stories about these characters was submitted to Harlan Ellison when he was reading for The Last Dangerous Visions, and I awaited his judgment with some trepidation. He rejected my story with a devastating six or seven-page letter telling me in great detail what was wrong with it, the kind of letter that can make someone want to give up writing altogether. Luckily, I was more used to rejections by then, and after some time had gone by and I was able to look at things more calmly, I realised that Harlan was right. By then, I had sold my first novel, which this story was going to be part of, and there was nothing to be done but to scrap the version of the story Harlan had rejected and to start all over again. Harlan’s criticisms definitely played a role in making Cloned Lives better than it would have been otherwise. (It’s also true that, if Harlan had accepted my story for The Last Dangerous Visions, he would still have been sitting on it and Cloned Lives never would have been published, but that’s another story.)

Selling my first novel before writing it (Cloned Lives was sold on the basis of an outline and the fact that three pieces of it had already been published as stories) meant putting myself in the hands of an editor before completing the work. There is always the temptation for an editor to start messing around with an incomplete work, or to try to push the author in a certain direction. The renowned editor John W. Campbell is famous for suggesting ideas and ways of writing a story to his authors; people can argue about whether he made the writers who worked with him much better writers than they might have been otherwise, or whether he exerted too much control over their work, but there’s no question that he greatly influenced the genre. His example may also illustrate the fine line between editing and rewriting. Whether Campbell
crossed this line or not isn’t something I’m prepared to discuss, but it is a potential trap for the editor, and especially for one who is also a writer. For the writer, another trap is ‘writing to order’ for an editor; some of Campbell’s later writers fell into this trap.

Luckily for me, the editor of my first novel, Joseph Elder, didn’t try to take over my first novel or shove it in a certain direction. Most of the time, he seemed content to let me write it in my own way while waiting for the results. It was only in retrospect that I saw that he had influenced *Cloned Lives* subtly, by making a few suggestions early on. He described this as ‘planting a seed’, and waiting to see if the seed would sprout, and in the end, his suggestions definitely influenced the book, especially the final chapter, where I had to pull the threads of the novel together. I think he may somehow have glimpsed the problems I might have later in resolving my story, and helped me to see what a possible resolution might be. He was subtle enough that, for a while, I thought I had come up with the ideas for the final section of the book entirely by myself. *Cloned Lives* would have been a very different book and, I think, a worse one without the editorial suggestions of Harlan Ellison and Joe Elder.

This constructive experience was in marked contrast to that of another writer I know. She contracted for a novel she had not yet written with an editor who shall remain nameless. He turned out to be one of those editors who wanted to read and edit sections of the book while the writer was still in the process of writing it. He described this as keeping the writer ‘on track’. I would contend that looking over the writer’s shoulder at a work still in progress, and trying to edit it, is always a mistake; the editor should have nothing whatsoever to do with that manuscript until the writer has a draft that she is willing to show. This happened to me with my novel *Venus of Dreams*, when an editor, after reading the final draft, strongly advised me to cut one of my subplots almost completely. He didn’t think that it was essential to the story. I strongly disagreed; if this subplot was taken out of the story, some earlier actions of the characters would also become irrelevant. Start pulling too many threads out of a novel, and the tapestry may unravel. I had to think hard about this problem, and the way I finally solved it was by taking the subplot that this editor wanted me to excise and expanding it instead, making it a more integral part of the novel. In other words, I did exactly the opposite of what my editor advised, and in the end, we both agreed that my novel was much improved.

So this editor turned out to be right about one thing; the subplot was a problem. He was simply wrong in his proposed solution; there was too little of the subplot, and there needed to be more. Here, it’s important for both the writer and editor to be able to agree that there may be several ways to handle problem areas in a manuscript, and that the obvious solution, or the one that first comes to mind, may not be the best one.

At this point, it must be clear that the absolutely essential element in the relationship of the editor to the writer is trust. The writer has to trust that the editor is giving her best and most considered judgment, and the editor has to trust the writer to deal with criticism in a rational manner. Each has to be prepared to contend with the other, and also to admit that each might be mistaken. Each has to believe that the purpose they both share, the one that overrides everything else, is to publish the work in the best form possible. Such a relationship is tricky under even the best circumstances. Needless to say, our current publishing climate does not present the best circumstances.

I can offer one brief example from my own recent experience. I handed in an extremely long manuscript of my historical novel *Ruler of the Sky* which was crossed by an editor or not isn’t something I’m prepared to discuss, but it is a potential trap for the editor, and especially for one who is also a writer. For the writer, another trap is ‘writing to order’ for an editor; some of Campbell’s later writers fell into this trap.

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I can offer one brief example from my own recent experience. I handed in an extremely long manuscript of my historical novel *Ruler of the Sky* which was not quite as long as *Cloned Lives*. However, I found myself in a similar situation. My editor, Dr. Martha Johnson, was very specific about certain changes she wanted me to make. I then realized that my manuscript was still quite long and that I might need to trim it down. My editor was very supportive and offered to help me with this process. She suggested that I work with her to come up with a solution that would satisfy both of our needs. I accepted her offer and we began to work together on my manuscript. This process required a great deal of patience and collaboration, but in the end, we were able to come up with a solution that met both of our needs. I am grateful to Dr. Johnson for her support and guidance throughout this process.
to my American and British publishers, Crown and Chatto & Windus. The American editor dealing with my final draft was not the editor who bought this novel; he had inherited it after my original editor left Crown, and my book had passed through other editorial hands before ending up in his. This is a recipe for disaster, since neither the writer nor the editor has chosen each other. In publishing circles, such books are called ‘orphans’, and it’s an appropriate term. After all, if some orphans can hope to find good homes with kind and loving parents, a lot more are likely to end up in foster homes or in institutions.

I knew from the outset that I was probably going to have to do some cutting on *Ruler of the Sky*, since my typewritten manuscript was almost 1400 pages long, but that didn’t worry me too much. I had been writing long enough by then to know that I have a tendency to get too wordy, or to let certain scenes run on at too great a length, so I was expecting my editors to ask me to trim and compress. (This illustrates another truth about writers and editors; if a writer is truly aware of what she’s doing, and has enough experience, an editor’s suggestions will rarely surprise her totally if they are astute. You find yourself nodding and saying, ‘Yeah, I thought there might be something wrong there,’ because unconsciously you’ve sensed a problem. It’s a little like the process of *anamnesis* Plato describes, where you feel that you are recalling something you’ve forgotten.) Both my American and British editors agreed that my novel needed to be shorter; the fact that they did agree on this point indicated to me that I could trust their judgment on this matter, especially since my British editor was wildly enthusiastic about the book and was the person who had originally bought *Ruler of the Sky* for Chatto & Windus.

So I did some revisions, and got the manuscript down to about 1200 pages, then did some more revisions, and got it under 1100 pages. At this point, I was convinced that the revisions up to then had definitely improved the book, but that any more cutting and compressing would seriously damage it. And then I got a phone call from my American editor.

‘You’ve got to cut it some more,’ he said, and I was immediately suspicious of his motives, because he was not saying that it was too wordy, or that there were still redundancies in it, or anything like that, only that the book had too many pages. ‘I can’t cut it any more,’ I told him. ‘I mean, how much shorter do you expect it to be?’ He said, ‘Well, I could use something in the range of about six hundred manuscript pages.’ ‘Six hundred pages!’ I said. ‘That’s half the size it is now! I can’t cut it that much — it won’t be the same book.’ ‘Of course it’ll be the same book,’ he replied. ‘It’ll just be shorter.’

That was when I had final confirmation of what I had long suspected, namely that this editor did not have the best interests of my book at heart; he just wanted to get something into the stores that was of the requisite length and wouldn’t cost the publisher as much to print. In this case, I was lucky; my British editor was on my side, and so the published version of *Ruler of the Sky* both here and in Britain is the one in my close-to-1100-page manuscript. But this experience illustrates one of the persistent problems in the relationship between writers and editors. Once the writer knows that the editor isn’t truly interested in making his book the best book it can possibly be, but has some other agenda in mind, the trust he needs to work well with an editor is destroyed. Considerations of commerce have always been a part of publishing, but now they override almost everything else. The writer can’t trust the editor, because the editor’s interests may not be, and probably are not, the writer’s interests. The writer might still be able to work constructively with such an editor, one whose primary considerations are practical ones, if he is at least honest about his motives rather than trying to hide them. Cynically, you might decide that this is one of the things that constitutes ‘being a pro’. But you are not going to trust the editor to do what should be his most important function — to help you revise and edit your book.

Sometimes it is incumbent on the editor to realise that a particular book or story needs no editing. This can be one of the most difficult judgments an editor faces, knowing when to do nothing. Occasionally a writer will get it right by himself: know when that has happened. The editor and the doctor should share one dictum: ‘First, do no harm.’ There are editors who don’t do enough, and also editors who don’t know when it’s time to cease and desist; copy editors are especially prone to this lapse.

Some years back, I had a fairly lengthy discussion with one editor. We were talking about the book that I was writing, and then she made an interesting comment. She said that she almost never thought about any of the books she was editing except at certain points when a deadline for delivery was approaching, when deciding on artwork for the cover, while working with the writer on revisions, sending out page proofs to writers and reviewers for comment, and so forth. The rest of the time,
she never thought about a particular book at all.

With this comment, she had hit on one of the crucial differences in the ways a writer and an editor view a particular work. To the editor, the writer’s book is one of many projects competing for her time, only intermittently floating to the surface of her consciousness. To the writer, that book probably has, for prolonged periods of time, constituted much if not most of her daily life. I have had the experience with a few of my books of becoming so engrossed in finishing them that I wasn’t even quite sure of what season it was; I recall disappearing into a draft of one book sometime toward the end of August and then emerging from my fictional world to discover, with a shock, that there was less than a week left before Christmas. A novel, especially one written over a long period of time, can come to dominate a writer’s life. No novel, not even the latest John Grisham or Stephen King production, is ever going to dominate an editor’s life to that extent. Any novel, in the end, is only one of many things competing for the editor’s time.

The editor asked me what could be done to overcome this dichotomy. The answer is: not much. I told her that it probably wouldn’t hurt if editors at least recognised this basic fact of life, namely that the book they intermittently thought of as the second lead for the March paperback slot might be, to its author, a psychologically pervasive environment that at times has constituted much of his world. Keep in contact with the writer, I advised her, drop him a note once in a while, or call, not to pressure him or to ask ‘Where’s that manuscript?’ but just to let him know that you are thinking about the project, that it isn’t just getting lost among all your other demands, that you’re there if he needs you. This can keep a writer going. This may seem very little to ask, but in today’s publishing world, it may well be asking too much.

Because the reality of publishing now is that the editor doesn’t have nearly enough time to do her job, let alone to nurture obsessive writers in the throes of their novels or to give needed editorial guidance to newer writers. The editor must attend meetings and deal with sales departments actually, that’s putting it euphemistically. The editor has to listen to sales departments and heed their advice, since they are now basically in the business of pretty much telling her what to buy and for how much. My colleague James Gunn puts it this way:

> At one time, science fiction was a reader-driven category; so little money was to be made from it that editors often chose the books to publish that they themselves liked or respected ...

Today science fiction is a market-driven category, in which the expectations of retailers anticipate, and in some measure control, the responses of book buyers and shape the expectations of publishers ... Readers can’t buy all SF books anymore; they must be guided by name recognition, special-interest appeals, or the same kinds of nonspecific audience stimuli that move books in other categories.

A recognition of this fact of life has led over the past couple of decades to the dependence of the editorial process on the reports and then on the projections of the sales division. The sales personnel, who are in close contact with the book buyers for chains and sometimes with individual book dealers, estimate the sales of any title even though they have not read the book and wouldn’t have the time to do so even if they had the desire. Of course, sales projections are a self-fulfilling prophecy; the books in which the sales force has no confidence often do not get published, and those that are published may not be pushed with enthusiasm, tend not to be ordered by a local buyer, and are not available or are not displayed in a way that will encourage widespread purchasing. As a consequence, even those editors who still make publishing decisions independent of input by sales personnel must spend considerable amounts of time preparing to promote their titles with the sales force at special meetings ... (‘The Year in Science Fiction,’ in Nebula Awards 30, pp. 28–9).

Or as another of my fellow writers puts it: ‘Publishers are now in the business of preventing the publication of books.’

The task one thinks of as the editor’s most important job working with the author on his manuscript is apparently now the task considered the least important. Editors are in the business of acquiring manuscripts now, as opposed to editing them. Every once in a while, we folks in the outer creative circles hear rumours about big blockbuster novels that have gone through the entire process of being published without anyone at the publishing house having actually read them. I can’t vouch for the truth of these stories, but the fact that some people believe them says a lot about publishing today. Maybe we need a new job description for the positions held by many of the people now called editors.
If the nature of the relationship between writers and editors is often poorly understood by writers and editors themselves, who often are forced to treat it as an adversarial one, it seems even less obvious to publishers. If publishers understood how crucial the element of trust is between writers and editors — trust in each other’s judgment, trust that the editor is being honest with the writer in discussions of the manuscript — would they put so hard to undermine it? Would they put editors in the position of having to hide what is really going on from the writer, or even lying to the writer? Would they put writers, on whom they depend for their principal product, in the position of having disputes with their editors over lapses and screwups and unkept promises?

I sometimes suspect that publishers, either consciously or perhaps unconsciously, do understand exactly how much trust is needed for a writer and an editor to be able to work successfully together on what should be their primary task. I also think that somehow they may realize that destroying that trust will ensure that writers and editors never find common cause, that they will never join forces to fight publishing practices that are harmful to them both. Because, in spite of certain interests that are different that the editor must represent the publisher, and can’t consistently lose money for his employer, while the writer must fight for her work above everything else the writer and the editor should be, and often are, natural allies. It is not in the interests of publishers at the moment to encourage such alliances. Better to pit the writer against the editor who is her only contact with the publisher and who is usually the writer’s only advocate at the publisher’s. It’s the same method used by those who prefer to see poor whites pitted against poor people of colour instead of watching both groups band together.

This brings up another important requirement for the ideal editor: being the writer’s advocate. It is a role discouraged in the current publishing world, where an editor seen as too close to writers can be regarded with suspicion.

Are editors necessary? The sad truth is that the more the publishing business pushes them into non-editing jobs that take up increasing amounts of their time — going to meetings, making sales pitches and thousands of other tasks, most of them without enough help or without any assistance at all — and the more adversarial the editor–writer relationship becomes, the more unnecessary the editor seems. Almost every traditional task of the editor, such as going over the manuscript, tightening the prose, recasting sentences, and all the rest of it, is something the writer can learn to do for herself. Most accomplished writers, and also many of those who have been writing for a while, have learned to be their own editors. What you find out, to put it simply, is that you cannot edit while you’re in the actual process of writing, but that if you let the manuscript sit long enough, you can approach it more objectively later. I have had the experience, with some of my unpublished stories, of having had to let them sit for years before being able to see clearly how they could be edited and rewritten. What happens is that you approach the manuscript as a different person, someone who isn’t as close to it, who is separated from the manuscript by time and thus able to read it more objectively, someone who has probably in the interim gained a little more experience as a writer. That writer–self reading the manuscript (or maybe I should call it an editor–self) may be as different from the writer–self who wrote it and the earlier editor–self who read it as any person is from the person she was years ago. The writer can sometimes become his own best editor. Given the way publishing now works, and the fact that even the most well–meaning and conscientious editors have less and less time for doing what used to be called editing, becoming your own editor can even be seen as self-defence, or as simply part of the job description of being a writer.

In the increasingly convoluted and decadent environment of publishing, we now also see new editions of previously published books. This makes sense if the new edition of the work restores what might have been lost in earlier editions, or if it’s the writer having second thoughts and deciding a book needs rewriting, or if a conscientious editor is actually at work, but here again, the publisher’s desire to sell more books seems to be the strongest motivation. One science–fictional example (and there are others) is a recently published edition of Robert A. Heinlein’s The Puppet Masters, in which passages cut from the earlier edition by Heinlein and his editor have been restored. Whether the new edition is better is hard to say. Does it reflect the author’s intentions? Maybe, but a good editor can occasionally help to change a writer’s mind about some of his earlier intentions. Is the new edition a better version of The Puppet Masters? Heinlein was, for all his skill, a writer who got noticeably more self-indulgent in his later years, when editors let him freer to do as he liked.

A more striking example might be the recent publication of a new edition of Herman Melville’s little–known novel Pierre, or the Ambiguities. Here, Hershel Parker, the Melville scholar and biographer, knowing that several
chapters of *Pierre* were written by Melville after he had completed the book and were added to it just before publication because Melville was enraged at his publisher for cutting his royalty rate in half, decided to excise these chapters from the new edition. But is this in fact restoring the novel to what Melville originally intended, or is it doing both the book and writer a disservice? Richard M. Brodhead, writing in *The New York Times Book Review*, wondered if such an approach was based on ‘a perverse editorial theory’ and went on to say:

The result may bear a close relation to what the book looked like at a certain stage of its history but even if it does, since when did readers feel they should have access to every stage of a work’s evolution? If Mr. Parker’s editorial principles take hold, libraries had better start building expansion areas to house all the different books that well-known books have been in their gestation. Right away we’ll need a new edition of *Moby-Dick* not called *Moby-Dick*, since that title was a last-minute substitution, and another new edition that gives us the book as Melville pursued it in an early conception *Moby-Dick* that did not yet contain an Ahab (‘The Book That Ruined Melville,’ by Richard H. Brodhead, in *The New York Times Book Review*, 1995).

This seems like a kind of anti-editing to me. And if it gets out of hand, maybe publishers will start looking for more anti-editors to bring out profitable variant texts.

Have editors become unnecessary? Have publishers actually helped to make them unnecessary? Maybe it’s time to acknowledge that, to abolish the term ‘editor’ and replace it with something more accurate in describing these positions in publishing — ‘manuscript purchaser’, for example, or maybe ‘book acquirer/production associate/marketing consultant and manuscript herder’. After all, we are all now living on Planet Downsize, where some people are laid off and others have to take on the laid-off workers’ tasks as well as their own. Maybe it’s time for all writers to take on the tasks of editors, and admit that the traditional function of an editor is obsolete. We writers could edit our own prose, and deal with our ‘book acquirer’ or ‘manuscript herder’ without expecting him to actually be an editor.

Except that there is a paradox here. The more publishers have made the traditional practice of editing seemingly irrelevant, the more they have demonstrated its necessity. Anyone who doubts this has only to read a few blockbusters or bestsellers at random. Pick up a few books by a once-interesting author who has fallen into repeating himself, or whose books have grown ever more flaccid. Read a few first novels that show promise, but could have used some editorial work they didn’t get. Because while it is true that an experienced writer can learn to become his own editor, he can also, left to his own devices, fall into some bad habits; and the beginning writer, the writer just starting out, needs good editing in order to fulfill her promise. One of the editor’s primary tasks is the discovery and development of new writers. The growth and development of any literature depends upon that task being carried out, but with the publishing business as it is now, any true nurturing of new writers happens almost by accident. New writers get a couple of chances, and if they don’t pan out, the publisher looks for some newer writers. Nurturing someone over the long term isn’t a big priority with many publishers these days.

We have been fortunate in science fiction up to now. Despite what has happened in book publishing, we have had some people, and still have them, who do the essential work of editors and who do try to develop new talent. Some of them are the magazine and anthology editors who will spend the time working with a writer on a manuscript, and encouraging new writers to try different things. Let us hope that we have such editors for some time to come, that the little magazines, the magazines with small circulations, and anthologies with small print runs don’t disappear in the quest for ever-larger audience shares. They are, in effect, our research-and-development laboratory. I would venture to say that many of the best science fiction writers we have would list a magazine or anthology editor as an important influence on their early work, or as a crucial factor in the development of their talent. (Some might list several such editors.) Some book editors would surely be on their lists, too, several of them writer/editors such as Frederik Pohl, Damon Knight, and Terry Carr, who have edited both short fiction and book-length manuscripts, as well as some prominent non-writers who have worked as the editors of novels. But editors working in the book business now have an increasingly harder time fulfilling the most necessary tasks of an editor. Some of the authors of bestsellers don’t get the editing that they should on the grounds that their books will sell well anyway. Newer writers don’t get the editing they should because nobody cares or else they’re encouraged to write imitative books instead of finding their own voices. Writers who have had some success are
encouraged merely to repeat it. It isn’t just the art of writing that’s being lost — the art of editing is being lost, too.

What can be done about this situation? I don’t know, since, as I pointed out earlier, trust has to exist between a writer and an editor for a good working relationship to be possible between the writer and the editor. The current climate definitely does not promote such trust, but there are still a few editors who merit it and have earned it.

Are editors necessary? I conclude that they are even more necessary than ever — but only if they’re very good!

**Further thoughts from 2009**

As recently as the fall of 2009, I have had two editors (one for a novel, the other a magazine editor), whose editorial suggestions served my writing well. I hope they are not members of an endangered species. If the priority of publishers in 1996 was making money, right now it seems to be simply surviving. As for writers, whenever anybody asks me what advice I would give to a beginning writer on how to get published, I realise that most of the nuts-and-bolts advice I got as a fledgling writer is now obsolete. About the only pieces of counsel still worth passing on are such bromides as ‘read widely’ and ‘keep writing’.

If you can go online and in effect ‘publish’ yourself, you don’t need the editor as gatekeeper, or provider of a publisher’s imprimatur that you are worthy of being read. Acquire enough readers, and you’ve made your case, if you can somehow break through the flood of other such writing. If a reader wants to interact with your text, by using it in a mashup, for example, is this an infringement on your rights as an author or something to be welcomed? If somebody steals your writing and posts it online, is this a violation of copyright or free publicity? Most ambitious writers have claimed that they would write for nothing. Increasingly, that’s exactly what many of us can probably expect: having to write for nothing and trying to make our living doing something else. Clay Shirky calls this the ‘mass amateurisation of publishing,’ in which pretty much anyone can publish and distribute his work, and it’s why the traditional business model for publishing, long on shaky ground, is rapidly collapsing.

**As for editors ...**

Right now, in science fiction and fantasy, there are still good editors plying their craft. Some edit magazines (both print and online), and at least for now that particular research-and-development lab persists. Others are small press publishers such as Tachyon Publications, Golden Gryphon Press, Wheatland Press, EDGE and Tesseract Books, Old Earth Press, PS Publishing, Hadley Rille, and a number of other worthy ventures; a look at the kinds of writers and books these independent houses are doing can quickly convince you that this is where much of the creative action is these days, at least if you’re looking for truly original work by some of the genre’s best writers. As long as a few people, now known as ‘niche audiences’ (is there any other kind these days), care about well-made and well-edited books in either paper or electronic formats, these publishers may have a better chance of surviving than do the big trade houses. And looking around at the abundance of free writing now available to all of us to read, I can only conclude that editors — not gatekeepers, not acquisitions editors, not manuscript herders, but editors willing and able to practice the art of editing — are more necessary than ever.

Like writers, they will probably have to content themselves with practising their craft simply for the love of it.

— Pamela Sargent, 1996, 2009
A life
Carolyn Janice Cherry, named after her grandmother (whom she much admired), was born in 1942 in St Louis, Missouri. She grew up in Missouri and Oklahoma, perhaps gaining an appreciation for huge tracts of sky there, and wondering what lay beyond them. At age ten, her favourite TV show, ‘Tom Corbett,’ was cancelled, so she began writing her own Corbett tales. In high school, she bought an old typewriter because writing in longhand hurt her hand (and she wrote a lot), and hasn’t stopped punching keys since then.

She earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in Latin from the University of Oklahoma in 1964, and a Master of Arts in Classics from Johns Hopkins University in 1965. She taught high-school-level Classics and Latin from 1965 to 1976, but quit teaching in 1977 on the advice of her first publisher, Donald Wollheim (DAW Books). He also advised her to alter the spelling of her last name for publishing purposes by adding an H at the end.

Cherryh lived in Oklahoma until the early 2000s, when she moved to Spokane, Washington with housemate, longtime friend and writing colleague Jane S. Fancher, their cats, and a lot of boxes. She again fell under the spell of salt-water aquarium keeping soon after.

Her website is at cherryh.com and her associated (and new) blog is Wave Without A Shore. With Fancher and Lynn Abbey, Cherryh has formed Closed Circle, a publishing website and salespoint for revised editions of these authors’ out-of-print books as well as new projects.

A writer’s career begins
In 1977, her first submitted novel to DAW, Gate of Ivrel, was accepted and published in paperback, initiating the adventures of and relationship between Morgaine and her sworn-man Vanye, a duo that has brought four novels so far into readers’ hands. From there, Cherryh became a full-time writer, supported in her work and ideas by the Wollheim family, as is still the case today.

She won the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer in 1977, the Best Short Story Hugo in 1979 (‘Cassandra’), also nominated for a Nebula in 1978, and went on to win Best Novel Hugos for Downbelow Station and Cyteen. Two other novels were nominated for Hugos in 1983 and 1986. A Nebula award for
Best Novel came in 1978 for The Faded Sun: Kesrith.

Fifty-plus books down the road, Cherryh’s most recent works are The Collected Short Fiction of C. J. Cherryh and ReGenesis, the sequel to Cyteen.

Influences

With the advent of the World Wide Web, Cherryh jumped aboard the Information Superhighway and provided her readers a connection point to her life and works with her personal website, The Worlds of C. J. Cherryh. After several revampings and recoveries, the site is still the top source for information about the writer and her writings. She reveals much, and much is also hidden. This is not unusual for a writer who focuses on perception, true or otherwise, as a key element in her fiction.

Computers could be said to be a major influence in her writing, freeing her from retyping paper copies and carbons thereof.

The adventures of TV’s Tom Corbett likely fuelled Cherryh’s development of the grand scale, evident in novels such as Downbelow Station and Cyteen. She credits her dissection of Fritz Leiber’s short fiction with teaching her how to write effective prose. Andre Norton must have been an influence as well, for the same ethereal, high-fantasy tone Norton used in Moon of Three Rings can be found in Cherryh’s Morgaine novels, especially Gate of Ivrel.

Because her academic studies centered on Classical literature and archaeology, Cherryh’s worldbuilding skills are phenomenal. She employs immersion techniques to introduce a reader to her worlds, dropping one into the middle of an incident or event and then skilfully dusting back story and character details into the narrative as the action moves along. Even widely read SF fans may miss this on the first experience of a Cherryh novel; she makes it all seamless.

Major themes

The Other: Most science fiction fen know what this feels like: the Outsider, being different, etc. Cherryh’s genius in using this archetype is to send it off on a tangent, turning it into the Other as Maverick, the one who walks away from home and culture to adapt to and, in many cases, adopt another culture. In my contribution to The Cherryh Odyssey, the focus I chose was examining selected Cherryh characters who I thought best exemplified the Other as Maverick. Sten Duncan (the ‘Faded Sun’ series), Elizabeth McGee (Forty Thousand in Gehenna), Thorn (Cuckoo’s Egg), Raen a Sulhant Meth-maren (Serpent’s Reach), Morgaine (the Morgaine saga), Bren Cameron (the Foreigner series) and even Ari Emory II (Cyteen and ReGenesis) — all are Others and Mavericks, though many have tried to make these round pegs fit into square holes and failed. Attempts to make these characters conform to something they fundamentally cannot accept is the source for much of the conflict in their individual stories.

Perception: ‘I write about people who See, who See things differently,’ Cherryh wrote in her introduction to her short fiction collection Visible Light. How her characters perceive things, and how they act (or not) on those perceptions is at the core of Cherryh’s fiction. No two people
perceive a thing in the exact same way, and that gap, which can be a tiny crack or a huge canyon, dovetails with Cherryh’s Others and Mavericks. These characters are the bridges between what is and what could be, between the complacent and the bold. Characters who cannot comprehend the perception of others are not going to last long in Cherryh’s works.

Perspective can change; it can be blinded and stultified by past experience. Cherryh’s works show us that change is life, stagnation is death, and those who adapt are the ones who will be writing the future’s history books. The Romans are with us in their writers and ruined buildings and systems of government, but they are no longer an empire. The Chinese are still here; they adapted, their perspective changed enough to keep their power viable a while longer.

Technology: curse or blessing?: Cherryh’s science fiction examines the benefits and the drawbacks of technological change on humans and their societies. She doesn’t always look at ‘advances’ in technology; Forty Thousand in Gehenna is in part a study of what might happen to a starship-load of colonists (born-human and lab-born) taken to a planet to settle it and claim it for one government (Union), then being abandoned by that government and losing most of the technological edge with which they arrived. Machines break down, local wildlife interferes with their efforts, and eventually a whole generation of children is lost to a life form that the adults either cannot or will not attempt to understand. Cherryh has examined this and other subjects, such as human cloning, genocide (more than once), human/not-human contact and the development (or hindrance) of acceptable working relations between them, how commerce in space might work, interstellar war and every flavour of intrigue imaginable. As a Classics teacher, I suspect she’s read Machiavelli; he’s one of the characters in the In Hell shared-world series.

C. J. Cherryh first came to my attention when I saw her first published novel on a bookstore shelf, picked it up and read the glowing blurb that Andre Norton provided for the book cover. Norton one of my two entrées into SF, and my admiration of her made anything she recommended golden. So I bought the book, and became a Cherryh admirer as well.

The writing skill Cherryh has become most identified with is what she calls ‘third person intensive’, a point of view that allows for deep personal examination as well as psychological immersion into the mind of a character. She may not have invented it whole, but she’s arguably the writer who’s taken it the furthest with the most success. Some readers find it off-putting, preferring to read novels with more ‘action’, but judging from the popularity of her Foreigner series, more readers like this deep-set POV style and want more of it.

Why read Cherryh? Because she’s been doing what she’s doing for over 30 years now, and doing it well enough to make a living at it. Only a handful of other SF writers can make the same claim. Even a sampling of her work in SF should be taken, because an alternate view is a mind-opening thing — for those willing to take the journey.

Critical writings on Cherryh’s fiction

A selected science fiction bibliography
Alliance/Union books (centered on the Company Wars)
- Downbelow Station
- Hellburner
- Rimrunners
- Tripoint
- Finity’s End
- Heavy Time
- Merchanter’s Luck

**Unionside novels (set on or heavily involving Union)**:
- Cyteen
- Regenesis
- Forty Thousand in Gehenna
- Serpent’s Reach

**Foreigner series**:
- Foreigner
- Defender
- Explorer
- Inheritor
- Invader
- Precursor
- Deliverer
- Conspirator
- Deliverer

**Chanur series**:
- Pride of Chanur
- Chanur’s Venture
- The Kif Strike Back

- Chanur’s Homecoming
- Chanur’s Legacy

**Other SF novels**:
- The Faded Sun trilogy (Kesrith, Shon’jir, Kutath)
- Hestia
- Hunter of Worlds
- Cuckoo’s Egg
- Brothers of Earth
- Port Eternity
- Wave Without A Shore
- Sunfall

**The In Betweens: Science Fantasy novels**

**The Morgaine saga**
- Gate of Ivrel
- Well of Shiuan
- Fires of Azeroth
- Exile’s Gate

**Merovingen novels**
- Angel with A Sword

**The Merovingian Nights (shared-world series)**

Inside the nightmare:
Liz de Jager interviews Kaaron Warren


Please introduce yourself and tell us a bit more about you and your writing career.

My name’s Kaaron Warren, and I’m an Australian currently living in Fiji with my family. Important things seem to happen every eleven years. At 22 I met my husband. At 33, I had my first child. At 44, my first novel is published.

I’ve always written fiction which is slightly outside the norm. Those are the ideas which appeal and appear to me. I’m squeamish, which surprises people, but that’s how I can write squeamish horror with emotion.

I wrote a novel at 14, and my first serious short story then, too. The novel is full of events of my life at the time and of the kinds of boys I wished went to my school: interesting, smart and handsome. It was heavily inspired by S. E. Hinton’s The Outsiders.

I wrote stories for about ten years before sending the first one out to a magazine, and it took four years after that for the first one to be accepted. Since then, I’ve sold stories every year, and always had that joy of receiving contributor’s copy — seeing my stories in print.

What is your most recent novel about — if you are allowed to tell us?

Slights is about a woman who, at 18, accidentally kills her mother in a car accident. I’m really bad at writing these descriptions, so I’ll give you the blurb I sent to Angry Robot Books as part of my submission: Stephanie (Steve) experiences near death as a result of her injuries, but she sees no shining light, hears no loving voices. Instead, she finds herself in a cold dark room, surrounded by people she barely knows. The only thing she recognises in them is anger; she sees that they are anxious for her to die so they can devour her.

She visits this room a number of times throughout the novel as she attempts suicide periodically. She is unpopular, disliked, unable to fit into society. She gradually recognises the people in the room; each and every one is a per-
son she slighted in some way.

Steve becomes obsessed with death. Her brother, a successful politician, has no time for her, and her police officer father died years earlier, a hero. She is obsessed with her own death because in the afterlife, at least, she is the centre of attention. And she becomes obsessed with the deaths of others.

She digs up her backyard with the intention of planting night-blooming jasmine, a comfort flower. Instead, she finds odd things; a cracked glass cufflink, an old belt, a dented lunchbox, a shoe heel, many more odd, small items. These lead her to understand more about her past, and about why she is driven to do the things she does.

What do you think makes the horror genre so fascinating to readers and writers?

I really can’t go past an answer I gave when I was in Year 6. I remember it clearly, because the teacher, a broad, tall, scary bloke who demanded a lot of his students and let you know when you were an idiot, ran a class at the library. He spoke about the different books you could read, and when he got to horror stories and ghost stories, he asked, ‘Why do you think people like these sorts of stories?’

I knew the answer, but was too frightened to put up my hand. He’d roar if I got it wrong. No one else answered, though, and his cheeks started to turn red, so I put my hand up and said, ‘People like being scared?’

His cheeks faded to pink and he gave me a broad smile. ‘She’s right. She’s exactly right.’

I think there’s a bit of shadenfreude about watching other people suffer in movies, or reading about them in books. It’s not just horror; it’s the tragic love stories, the war stories, the family dramas. That could happen to me, but it won’t. I think we gossip for the same reason. Though that could be a bit of the tall poppy syndrome, too.

There’s also the concept of catastrophic thinking. Imagining the worst. I think that once the worst is imagined, then whatever comes after can only be an improvement.
As a horror writer/fan, what sells a story/concept to you?

I’m a bit of an odd horror reader, in that I’m not big on vampires, mummies, slash killers or anything like that.

I like to be surprised. I don’t want to know where the story is going to go. I love crime fiction, but I don’t like the ones with recurring detectives, because so much of the story in these is going over what has been said before. I’m hungry for new material!

Some of my favourite writers for this reason are Martin Amis (Dead Babies is one of my favourite books), David Mitchell (Cloud Atlas in particular), Stephen King (The Stand and The Shining, among others), William Golding (everything the man ever wrote), Lisa Tuttle (short stories and novels), and there are many others. Suzy McKee Charnas is a recent discovery.

What movies and/or books influenced your development as a genre writer? Similarly, what books, movies, comics, get you excited as a fan?

I don’t think I was influenced to be a genre writer. More, these are the stories which come to me, and genre is where they are accepted. The places I like to go in my fiction can be shocking, and the things which happen disturbing. I think when you label something ‘horror’ you are given more leeway.

Bruce Gillespie, the Australian critic, says that I write from within the world of my stories, not as an observer. I think this is one of the reasons what I do is considered horror, because my characters accept and understand the things which are happening. I suck the reader into this as well. In ‘The Blue Stream’, I have children from the ages of 13 to 18 sent into suspended animation to get them through the hormonal stage. It’s a story which makes people angry, because the characters who are doing these things are the ones the reader is supposed to identify with.

The main genre writers who influenced me are Stephen King and Harlan Ellison: Ellison because he writes wild, imaginative fiction that can go anywhere, and King because he builds horror by using the characters. Agatha Christie is an influence, because I admire her story telling and the way she weaves her clues through the story. Her character descriptions stay with me; I can still picture Vera from And Then There Were None.

What movies and/or books influenced your development as a genre writer? Similarly, what books, movies, comics, get you excited as a fan?

S. E. Hinton, who wrote The Outsiders at 15, inspired me because I was young and wanted to be a writer and she succeeded. As I said above, my teen novel owes a lot to hers!

I don’t think there are any graphic novels or movies that influenced me as a writer, though I do find ideas in every thing I read and see. I always have a notebook handy (as most writers do) for scribbling down the what-ifs.

There are songs which have influenced me, though. I thought of this when singing karaoke at a Chinese restaurant in Suva last week. We were belting out ‘Hotel California’, and I was reminded of what a perfect horror story that song is. Draws you in gently, finishes in exactly the right place. I think the ending, ‘but you can never leave’ inspired me to finish my stories where they finish, rather than feeling as if I have to tie up all the loose ends to make a story work.

Who do you go all fan-boy about when it comes to the horror genre? Have you ever met anyone more famous than yourself and how did you react?

I was at the World Fantasy Convention in Saratoga Springs, New York, in 2007. Lisa Tuttle was one of the guests and she was friendly and accessible. I never dared talk to her! I’ve adored her writing for probably twenty years and I just couldn’t think of anything to say. My best chance was at a wonderful performance of two M. R. James short stories. The actor performed them as M. R. James himself, sitting in his study in Cambridge. The audience sat in the dark, with the stage only lit by candlelight. Lisa Tuttle sat two seats away, and still I didn’t say anything! But I worry about interrupting someone’s night. Being a fangirl and disturbing them. I’m sure she wouldn’t have minded.

If you had a chance to invite any horror legend, be it actor, writer, director, author (living/dead/undead) over for some tea, who would you choose and why?

I’d have a ladies’ luncheon with Daphne du Maurier, Rosemary Timperley and Celia Fremlin. I’m not sure about Rosemary Timperley, but du Maurier and Fremlin were both mothers, and both came up with nightmarish, very believable horror. I admire the tone of normalcy that runs through
their fiction alongside the awfulness. We’ll have cups of Earl Gray, a large
variety of sandwiches with the crusts cut off, tiny cakes and lots of
chocolate. I’d like to ask them how they managed the balance; how,
when they had devils dancing in their heads, did they fix dinner with a
smile.

**Lights on or off when watching horror flicks?**

Lights off! Unless I’m also doing something else (i.e. reading, writing,
playing computer game, cross-stitching) then lights on.

**Which do you prefer: Romero originals or remakes?**

The Romero movies are my exception to the rule that I’m not a fan of
zombie movies. I haven’t seen the remakes, though. There are some
hilarious scenes in the originals. I love the setting of *Day of the Dead*,
where the zombies stagger about the shopping mall with their trolleys.
Not a subtle depiction of non-dead shoppers, but still funny. I thought
of it a couple of years ago, when travelling in Canberra. There is a pub
about an hour’s drive out, in the bush, which was the meeting place for
bikies all over the region. It burnt down in the Canberra Bushfires of
2003. The time I travelled past, the black frame still stood. And in
amongst it? Bikies, drinking beer they’d bought from home, their
beautiful bikes sitting amongst the ashes. It made me think of people
and their habits, how they stick to them. The image helped inspire a story
called ‘Cooling the Crows’, about a bouncer (doorman) working in a pub
that burns down periodically.

I also love the joke in *Dawn of the Dead*. The zombies eat all the
paramedics, then get on the radio and say, ‘Send more paramedics’.
Cracks me up!

**What is the best advice you ever received from someone about
horror writing?**

I’m not sure if I received this first, or started giving it; do not balk. Do
not pull back from where you need to go to make the story work.

**The horror genre has seen many incarnations over the past few
years — what do you think the future holds for the genre?**

I think we’ll see more urban horror, more historical horror and I think
that slash horror will be with us for a while yet.

**Do you have a zombie apocalypse survival plan — apart from
going to hide in the Winchester, that is! — and will you be able to
implement it?**

Here in Fiji, we live in a cyclone-proof house with double reinforced doors.
I reckon that’ll do for zombies, too! We even have a cyclone plan: Stage
1. Preparation. Action you can take now. Stage 2. Zombies are possible.

We’ve got water, food, masking tape, candles, matches and a radio. I
also have a set of sea monkeys, which my writer friend Cat Sparks calls
zombies. They all died over Christmas, but I never got around to throwing
out their water. By February, we had more sea monkeys. Back from the
dead! So I figure any zombies which come will be so fascinated by the
sea monkeys they’ll leave us alone.

**Are there any ‘how to’ books on your bookshelf you would
recommend to aspiring authors?**

Stephen King’s *On Writing*. He moves well beyond genre and speaks to
everyone who’s ever written, or wanted to write.

The other book I use as a how to is my Fowler’s *Modern English Usage*.
I had to buy it again in Fiji, because I stupidly put my other copy into
storage. I refer to it often.

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‘Earthsea’ and ‘Tales From Earthsea’

By Terry Morris

Terry Morris was one of Adelaide’s best-known SF fans, before moving to Melbourne in the early eighties. Since then she married Hung, and they have two boys. She contributes regularly to ANZAPA (Australia and New Zealand Amateur Publishing Association). The following article appeared first in her ANZAPA fanzine Hold That Tiger! (December 2009).

Watching the DVD of studio Ghibli’s Tales From Earthsea, or, Gedo Senki, as it’s called in Japanese, sent me scurrying back to re-read the books of the series, this time making a point of reading them slowly. This was a pleasant experience. What I was really trying to do, though, was place the events of the film with what I remembered of the books. In fact, the film had little to do with the books.

It is now some months since I saw the DVD, which has long since gone back to the local library, and so now it is my memory of the film that is hazy. All I really remember is that I was not very impressed with it, and that the story line did not make much sense.

Long before I saw it, I heard that the film was a disappointment. This was odd, because Studio Ghibli makes beautiful films, and the ‘Earthsea’ series would easily lend itself to a visual realisation. Extra features on the DVD of Spirited Away showed how much research the Ghibli team put into their graphics. Indeed, there is a bit among the extras where the director explains how he took the team to visit a vet so that they could see how people force an animal to take a pill. He also had to show them how eels swim in a tank at a restaurant so that they could get the idea of how the dragon might move through the air, and what it might look like as it thrashes around in injury.

Given this eye for detail, and given that Japan is a series of islands, much as Earthsea is, and the population has links to the ocean through
popularity of seafood, it seemed reasonable to think that Ghibli would have a ready affinity with the sea, or at least would find it easy to get to a port to do some research.

However, it appears that none of that happened. Le Guin, as we know, has often been disappointed with attempts to film the Earthsea stories. A particular sore point is that although she had made an effort to make her characters non-white skinned, and was delighted at seeing them modelled in illustrations on American Indians, the films have tended to make them white. A mini-series, Legend of Earthsea, screened in Australia recently, had a rather blonde Ged. Plus, Ged was his world name and Sparrowhawk was his secret name, which is completely the wrong way around. Plus, the proud and isolated Ged was given a girlfriend for company, and Ogion the Silent talked a lot. I didn’t watch much.

Le Guin says of this film:

There was nothing I could do about it. There is nothing the book author can do about it: not with the standard Hollywood contract. A lot of people don’t know that. Even professional movie reviewers, who should know better, often write as if the book author were responsible for the movie. The very rare exception (such as J. K. Rowling’s control over the Harry Potter films) is thought to be the rule. But in most cases, the truth of a film to the book is entirely up to the honor, intelligence, and artistic integrity of the filmmakers.

Le Guin had decided that she would not give permission for any more films to be made of her classic series, so she turned Ghibli down when they approached her, and they went on to make Princess Mononoke instead.

Years later, though, Le Guin saw My Neighbour Totoro and changed her mind. If anyone could make a film of Earthsea, it would be Ghibli: a perfectly reasonable thing to think.

However, after the agreement was made, it turned out that Hayao Miyazaki would not be working on the Earthsea film after all. Instead, his son, Goro Miyazaki, took over as director, winning the position through the influence of other animators because of the beautiful poster he made. It was disappointing for Le Guin that Hayao Miyazaki would not be working on it, but she understood that he was busy and this film was being fitted in among other things, and that Hayao Miyazaki was retiring anyway. You can imagine how she felt when it turned out that he wasn’t retiring after all.

Goro and his father Hayao had a falling out during the making of the film. When I started looking for information on the film, to try and find out why it had turned out as it had — to find the answer to the question of ‘what were they thinking?’ — this was the information that kept cropping up. Goro, it seems, hardly knew his father, who had always been either at work or sleeping. Goro’s mother had also been an animator, but with Hayao so involved in his work, it was she who was left to raise the children. Goro remarks in his blog that it was his mother’s opposition, not his father’s, that originally kept him from developing a career in animation.

Despite having no experience with animation and having to learn on the job, Goro Miyazaki made the film in very short time, a little over eight months, officially, compared to around seventeen months for Spirited Away and Howl’s Moving Castle. The result became, according to one quote, the highest grossing Japanese film of all time. It is clear that some people love the film and, apparently, don’t think that there could be anything in the books that could add to the feeling of redemption they get from it. A Japanese correspondent explained to Le Guin:

There is a distinct division, and while many are devastated by the movie, there are also many who are elated with it ... Simply put, the Ghibli movie is a story of a boy who kills his father without cause, and of what happens to him after he then runs away. The other characters trust and succor him despite the fact, saving him whenever it seems everything is lost. Apparently, many in the elated group find the film gives them will to live.

For myself, I didn’t really like the film. If it had been a completely new story, I might have been more comfortable with it, but it had characters from the books, but included only elements of the storylines in a kind of mishmash. It had Ged, the wizard, Tenar, who begins as the girl priestess in The Tombs of Atuan and becomes a major, if non-magical, force in the Earthsea saga, Therru, the damaged child who is really a dragon in Tehanu, and Arren, a prince in the third book, The Farthest Shore. In the book, Arren is a really nice kid whom people find themselves wanting to
follow. In fact, he is a born king. In the film he is a prince who kills his father and runs away. Then some violence and stuff happens. Finding bits of familiar Earthsea threads, and then losing them, was disconcerting. Watching for the brilliance of Ghibli films and not finding it was off-putting. It was particularly surprising that most of the scenes were set firmly on land. There was no sense of islands in a lonely ocean, no sense of the sea as a constant element in people’s lives, and this was something that I really felt Ghibli could have brought to the Earthsea stories.

You might laugh and point out that the islands of Japan are very big, that there is no reason for the Ghibli studio to bring a particularly seafaring consciousness to the film. However, I argue that had they brought the same level of research to it as they did to, say, Spirited Away, that in making a film about islands and boatmen, they would have gone down to the sea to take a look. Perhaps not doing so was why the film was made so quickly.

It’s interesting to read Goro’s blog and discover the moments of beauty he found during the making of the film. All the same, I would have liked a meaningful and insightful plot.

One of the interesting things about the Earthsea books themselves is the progress of Le Guin’s thought as she wrote them.

A Wizard of Earthsea is about a boy who has strong powers of magic. He lives in a place of poverty, and the first reaction of his aunt, when she realises that he has potential, is to try to gain control of him. When her spell doesn’t work, she realises that he is more powerful than she thought. Now, one of the charms of the Earthsea books is the depiction of the culture in which everyone knows and understands that magic exists. Most of the people can’t do magic themselves, but those who can are available for hire. The people know where the wizards live, if they need to fetch one, and mages are regularly employed for such things as controlling the winds for the ships out at sea.

There is one point, though, on which magic touches the lives of everyone in Earthsea. This point is the idea that each person has a true name, a special name, secret and known to almost no one except themselves. This name is whispered to them by a wizard when they come of age, for wizards know about the finding of names. Afterwards, this secret name is rarely told to anyone else, not even to someone they love, for in Earthsea magical power lies in the knowledge of true names.

This idea of names having power is developed through the book. The magic of wizards is performed through the use of names, but knowledge of names is not easily come by. On the island of Roke, the young wizards spend a year doing nothing but learn long lists of names, and that’s just the beginning.

There is no need to dwell here on a detailed description of the plots of the Earthsea books. Suffice it to say that when I was in high school, A Wizard of Earthsea was one of the books I loved. Later I read The Tombs of Atuan, and didn’t like it as much because it seemed a bit dry, but I did like The Farthest Shore, which had dragons and magic in it again. Still, upon re-reading them, it’s possible to appreciate more the shortcomings of the characters and their need to redeem themselves. Ged’s own worst enemy is, of course, himself.

In The Tombs of Atuan, Tenar has a tendency to do as she is told, without question. It is tempting to think that the moment when she begins to have nightmares after ordering the deaths by starvation and thirst of some captives, that she is just trying to be made a more sympathetic figure; she does bad things but at least she feels badly about it. Perhaps, though, this is not the right interpretation. The rest of the novel depends on the idea that she can’t quite bring herself to do that again. She starts to, thus nearly killing Ged, but she changes her mind and tries to help him. Then she changes it again, but all the while keeping the matter as secret as she can from someone who would simply order
him killed and have done with it. These moments of Tenar’s do not have the poignancy of, say, Ged’s when he finds the body of his forgotten pet, the otak, stiff after having frozen to death when he left it behind to flee into a castle, but they do make up the threads of a story about someone trying to work out right and wrong for herself.

These stories are not about people who are ‘more sinned against than sinning’. They are about people who have to learn to live with the things they’ve done, and to balance their consciences with the kind of people they are. This is possibly the theme that most appeals to people who like the Ghibli film, Tales From Earthsea. Even though, in the film, Arren had murdered his father, he was still cared about and protected by people around him: you can do bad things and still be worth caring for.

In The Farthest Shore, Ged and his companion Arren go down into the land of the dead itself. It’s referred to as the Dry Land, and everything there is dull and seer, lifeless, with mournful ghosts wandering about. The go there essentially to heal a wound in the world, even though doing so takes all Ged’s magic ability, the source of his pride and the very thing he most defines himself by, and leaves him with none of it. In Tehanu, besides the story of Tenar and Therru, we see Ged deal with this loss.

These all make perfectly good stories.

However, times change.

Race, skin colour and gender were all issues in the background of Le Guin’s thinking when she created Earthsea. She consciously made the people of Earthsea non-white-skinned people. The issue of the culture that goes with the non-white-skinned people was not as huge as it would have been had she written a mainstream novel and arbitrarily made her characters any colour she pleased. In that case the idea of race fail might have been raised: the idea that characters are any colour on the outside, but are still white on the inside, that they always ‘act white’, and their creation is just another example of white people being patronising anyway.7

In SF&F the cultures are as fictional as the characters, and the people operating in those cultures could indeed have any skin colour, even blue or green, tentacled or antennead or anything as long as it doesn’t interfere with the plot.

In Earthsea, too, the characters could be anything, even dragons, and Le Guin did her best to be inclusive, making Ged, for instance, a dark, red-brown colour, with black hair.

Another issue is that of the way the afterlife is depicted in the Earthsea world.

I must explain that when I first read the books, long ago, I was reading them whenever, by chance, I happened across them, which is quite a different thing from reading them as they come out. Far more time can have elapsed reading one book and then the next, when you’re relying on chance to find them, making their development seem more drawn out. Thus it was that I had the feeling that Le Guin had had second thoughts about her depiction of the land of the dead. Her Dry Lands are analogous to the underworld of Greek mythology, the dark bits without the Elysian fields. The Dry Lands of Earthsea are bare and the spirits are mournful. Given that this dark and arid place is where the ghosts are meant to dwell forever, one wonders what on earth the dead did to deserve this. Some of them were heroic during their lives, but they, too, are condemned to a dry and dusty afterlife.

Le Guin’s Dry Lands are first met in A Wizard Of Earthsea. In The Farthest Shore, and maybe in Tehanu, as well, it seemed to me that she was feeling that there was something wrong with this picture and that it needed to be rectified. Therefore in The Farthest Shore, Ged and Arren learn that someone has disrupted the balance of life and death: someone desiring immortality has caused a leak in the Dry Lands, requiring them to fix it.

Whether things improve is a matter of interpretation. The case for accepting death, which Ged puts to Cob, who is causing the damage by trying to be immortal, is that life is still out there in the living world, and all that dwells in the Dry Lands are the names and the shadows. One supposes that dying in Earthsea is a bit like going to live in a list. It doesn’t even have the colour of dictionary definitions, it’s just names in a file.

The main point I’m suggesting, though, is that Le Guin might have realised that her land of death in A Wizard of Earthsea didn’t really make sense, and so devised a plot whereby there was something wrong with it that could be fixed.
Upon re-reading all the books, one straight after another, though, I don’t get the feeling so much that she is trying to correct an idea about the land of the dead. It does becomes clear, though, that she is re-thinking the idea that the wizards’ school on Roke should be an all-male domain. It seemed natural enough in the first book, it being about a wizard and ‘wizard’ being a masculine term, but upon reflection it doesn’t make much sense that only men’s magic should be strong or worth considering.

In her fifth novel in the series, *The Other Wind*, women begin to return to Roke. That women had been important in the founding of the school there we find in the collection of short stories, *Tales From Earthsea*. The stories in *Tales* take us through a history of magic in Earthsea, and finishes just before the events of *The Other Wind*. By this time it is not just reconciliation between men and women that is needed, but also one between Humans and Dragons. Humans act, they take action and influence the world, while Dragons long ago decided to just Be. The wizards of Roke, therefore, are having to rethink their ideas on balance, but while they are aware that the world is out of balance, the minds of many of them simply cannot conjure the idea of women on Roke (they must be bad at history). The idea of dragons is a bit easier for them, even a female dragon.

Along with an absence of women in the school is a lack of sex. That this should become an issue seems a bit odd to those of us who are accustomed to assuming that the sex is taking place off-stage where it won’t interfere with the main action of the story. In *Tales*, Le Guin says the need for celibacy was more psychological than real. The celibacy was maintained through spells.

So as Le Guin grows and changes over the years, so does her world. Still, if she published *A Wizard of Earthsea* now, not a lot would be different. Girls could be put into the school on Roke, but Ged would still react to the selfish temptress, Serrit, just as he did in the original story, and everything in *A Wizard of Earthsea* would play out just as it did. There would be a problem with the later books, though, because the wizards would not have a problem with the idea of a woman coming to Roke; they would easily find a new archmage, and so the need for correction that informs so much of the books, especially *Tales of Earthsea*, would not be there. Just as the characters of Earthsea are flawed and therefore interesting, life-affirming because they choose to carry on with their burdens, so the books are more interesting because they show the twists and turns of the author’s thinking. Le Guin’s thinking in the ‘Earthsea’ stories is a reflection of the changes of society through the years that she has lived. The issues of feminism and race have not gone away but have remained major concerns, and so watching the twists and turns of the books as they are re-thought is itself a pleasure.

**Notes**

2. [http://www.nausicaa.net/miyazaki/earthsea/blog/blog40.html].
3. The Hayao Myazaki Web : Gedo Senki (Tales From Earthsea) [http://www.nausicaa.net/miyazaki/earthsea/faq.html #leguin].
4. Another review, with less grandiose language, says that *Tales from Earthsea* topped the billboard for four weeks in a row and earned over $60 million overall [http://www.dvdbeaver.com/film2/DVDReviews33/tales_from_earth_sea.htm].
5. [http://www.ursulakleguin.com/GedoSenkiCorrespondents.html].
6. The people of Earthsea have a bit more discretion in love than people these days who send intimate digital pictures of themselves to their lovers and are then put out when the relationships ends and, in the following turmoil, the pictures are broadcast. The citizens of Earth-sea are very restrained when it comes to giving out their true name.
7. At least, that’s *my* understanding of race fail, anyway.
8. I couldn’t believe it when I read that there were people who thought that no sex happens at Hogwarts. Why would they think that? It’s made pretty clear that the teenagers at Hogwarts are doing all the usual semi-secret stuff that might be expected of them, and so it seems reasonable to assume that a normal percentage of them are also managing far more secret stuff, although it’s behind the scenes, while Harry is not looking because he’s on guard against Voldemort.

— Terry Morris, December 2009
C. S. Lewis suggested in *The Magician’s Nephew* that all a child had to do was jump into one of an unlimited number of ponds to reach a world where exciting things could happen. The wood between the worlds is a lovely conceit.

Ursula Le Guin’s approach to leading readers into new and strange places is both simpler and subtler. She doesn’t describe the pools arrayed for exploration. She shows us through her subjects, her approaches and even the styles of writing she chooses that the limits to exploration are within ourselves. She gives us the tools we need to venture into new worlds and to start to understand the ambiguities of what we are seeing and then she explains to us (in clear and simple terms) the power of the imagination and the reader’s mind.

I wish I could say that these three concepts divided simply into three books: *Changing Planes*, *Always Coming Home* and *The Wave in the Mind*. I wish I could say this, because I want a simple structure for this essay and I want to touch lightly on each book.

They don’t. They don’t divide this neatly by book, because her concepts aren’t graven in stone, but as fluid as the almost-water of the pools in the wood between the worlds.

Le Guin presents ideas so simply that it’s easy to forget that the ideas aren’t simple at all. In these three books she takes us to the heart of her other writing and makes us understand why speculative fiction is — at its best — the most powerful writing of all.

The first time I read *Always Coming Home* I thought it was conceited. I had studied my little bit of anthropology (as historians do, these days) and I saw ideas I already knew translated into a future imperfect and I said ‘So what?’ Years later I returned to it, and I discovered that what was obvious to me then is not nearly as obvious to me now.

*Always Coming Home* first came out in 1985. Like many ground-breaking books it looked then as if it relied heavily on current intellectual theories. The relativism of culture and the impossibility of really understanding things without really understanding oneself appeared almost faddish. Over 20 years later the faddish looks like a created world, and a fictional construct and the underlying truths begin to show. The bones of this book are strong and thoughtful, and it pays reading and re-reading.

*Changing Planes* has the simplest idea at its base: when we’re bored, our minds travel and maybe our bodies can, too. It’s the classic science fiction or fantasy formula, asking ‘what if?’
Many writers have used this formula. Marcel Aymé is one of my favourites: he created many short stories by expanding on a simple idea. ‘What if someone could walk through walls?’ he asked and then wrote *Le Passe-Muraille*.

As with everything Le Guin writes, however, the simple concept is only the beginning. ‘What if?’ may be the point whence the wave comes, or it might be a strange place in the middle of the curve. Her stories and books can be travelled in so many directions and described in so many ways. The simple idea at the base of *Changing Planes*, for instance, is what makes it easy to read the first time through: it’s not what defines the book and shapes its heart.

If I had been reading this book 20 years ago I would probably have taken it literally, and become a bit bored by the sameness of the worlds Le Guin’s character visits. There is a bit of romance, a lot of politics, misguided genetic manipulation, long sunsets, but they’re all interpreted through a single gaze, and that gaze limits the vision. One thing about Le Guin, however, is that you can’t assume she doesn’t mean to limit the vision intentionally. In all her writing there is a very deep awareness of the role of perception of self in manipulating reality and of language in expressing the limits of perception. Even in her children’s books, self is a construct that can change the shape of worlds and even universes. It’s that undulating wave again. What shape is a wave, if you can’t snapshot it and take it out of time?

*Changing Planes* may help us understand how the wave can be different things at the same moment. The book has such a simple ‘What if’ premise that it makes it easier to see some of the different approaches than in some of Le Guin’s other works.

First, the notion of sitting down in, say an airport lounge and dreaming oneself into alternate worlds is a very attractive coat hanger for metaphors. It’s science fictional if it’s literal, and metaphorical if it’s not. Thus the wave can be the movement and flow that we see inside ourselves as we change who we are by dreaming ourselves into new places and foreign situations.

From another angle, the wave is the nature of self in the narrative. What role does the transported person play? Are these people simply decorative? Temporary visitors with limited effects? Or do they play the role that many transients play in science fiction and fantasy novels, of the visitor who sets massive change in motion? What’s really interesting about *Changing Planes* is that Le Guin mostly leaves this open — we don’t know a great deal of the visitor’s effect on most societies.

In this simple ‘what if’ scenario we can also explore the possibilities of how societies operate: created societies with hefty personal consequences (the maize girl story). The nature of created societies can be seen in people and literal storytelling metaphors for what happens to us, helping us expand our realities and see outside ourselves. Short stories don’t have to be short on consequences: it’s all a matter of looking into the tale and exploring it from different directions. Seeking the shape of a particular wave that suits your current needs, perhaps.

In *Changing Planes*, the moment of change for the point of view character can be slight and subtle. Sometimes it is travel that changes the self and sometimes it is the society.

Moment of change for self can be slight and subtle. There’s a great deal of ambiguity in these stories. It’s a different kind of ambiguity from that in *Always Coming Home*, and the stories (deceptively) look simpler, but demonstrates the level and type of writing craft that Le Guin uses.

At one level, Le Guin is a practising cultural anthropologist who just happens to use fiction to express her theories. At another level she’s a
storyteller who focuses on the tales told by individuals — often mundane, often fragmentary, and the anthropological elements are just aspects of people’s lives. At yet another level, she explores what fiction is and why it does what it does. And at another level she entertains.

Looking at these books together helps illuminate these aspects of her writing and provides a mirror reflection for the reader. What do we carry with us when we read fantasy and science fiction? What limits do we put on our perceptions? Do we — as the narrator initially does in *Always Coming Home* — completely misinterpret how a society has lived because we bring our own lives to bear upon our reading?

These books are worth treasuring, both individually and together. Individually they entertain and make us think. Together, they make us question reality. Maybe, after a time, if we get to know them well enough, the books will serve as manuals of instruction, and more of us will be able to change planes, and expand what we see and how we think about things and understand who we are and what boundaries we place on our worlds.

Sometimes Le Guin’s essays and speeches (the most recent collection of which is *The Wave in the Mind: Talks and Essays on the Writer, the Reader, and the Imagination*) give the impression of an eternal present, constantly reshaped to identify matters of import. This is partly because her work has such a strong anthropological undertow, and anthropology tends towards an eternal present. Le Guin only half addresses those matters of import in *The Wave in the Mind*, though she does address her anthropological background. She fleetingly mentions how women writers were celebrating women writers past while their male counterparts were scared of influences. She looks at the role of her honorary Indian uncle in shaping her particular approach to the universe. She begins — in short — to explore where her writing comes from and why it takes the shape it does, but doesn’t look deeply or at length. She is more interested in raising ideas, maybe for her readers to continue exploring.

In the essay on her Indian uncle, it becomes clear that Le Guin’s novelist stance of someone who realises she is forever an outsider is not one of chance. She was brought up with an acute awareness of the cultures of others and with far less awareness of her own.

The self-discovery after a long period of outsidersness of Tenar and Ged in the *Wizard of Earthsea* books might be her own emotional voyage. *Always Coming Home* has learning to handle differences as one of its themes (the girl from two cultures in ‘Stone Telling’) but it moves significantly beyond this. The culture of the narrators is mostly implied rather than explained — it’s usually a bit secondary to the cultures of the stories.

Le Guin tells stories beautifully, but she also uses them. She doesn’t present a single message, but gives to readers a fluid series of possible ways of seeing things. It’s like opening your eyes in the morning, having carefully stripped off all expectations about what you might see. Suddenly a familiar bedroom is an alien landscape.

She doesn’t assume just an intellect at work (the mistake I made the first time I read *Always Coming Home*) — she brings emotions and the physical world into how the story resonates. Even when she’s not telling a story in a traditional manner, it’s the story that counts. This can be confusing to readers, because we expect action narratives and to be able to keep our emotions and our intellects and our stories nicely boxed apart.

Language is what ties the reality of Earthsea together. The importance of it and the strength of it and the aches it can bring are never far from the reader in any of the ‘Earthsea’ books and in much of her other writing. Gender and politics have been written about and written about. How not?
The *Dispossessed* and *The Left Hand of Darkness* were landmark books in both regards. But the gender issues and the political notions aren’t as deep a current as the relationship of language with reality and the link between world building and storytelling.

In a way, it’s as if she is using her stories to act as her theory — to serve instead of philosophical or gender diatribes, not to deliver a message, but to develop the theory and explore boundaries.

A dance, a landscape painting — we’re less likely to talk about its message than simply about the feelings it rouses in us. Or music: we know there’s no way to say all a song may mean to us, because the meaning is not so much rational as deeply felt, felt by our emotions and our whole body, and the language of the intellect can’t fully express those understandings.

Ursula Le Guin said this in a Children’s Book Council article (http://www.cbcbooks.org/cbcmagazine/meet/leguin_ursula_k.html). She was arguing against too much of precisely what I’m doing here. Arguing against everything being turned into intellectual messages. I think, though, that this is what I’m saying here. With her writing, there is a direction I come from where intellectual discourse and analysis fit divinely. But there are also other directions, where other reactions and feelings fit, equally divinely.

A mathematician can reduce the shape of a wave to angles and numbers, without diminishing its beauty. A surfer can ride through that wave. An artist can paint that wave. I can stand on a beach and watch that wave roll in, ever changing, ever the same. Published fiction is always collaborative: the relationship with the reader is always integral to what the work exists as, after it leaves home and enters the world of the published. This means that there is always subjectivity. No two readers will quite agree on how to read a novel. The depth of difference in how Le Guin’s work can be read and interpreted and enjoyed, however, is exceptional and extraordinary.

It’s a rare writer whose work has the same shape as a wave. The shape of the wave is secondary to its loveliness.

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**Ursula K. Le Guin: Select Bibliography**

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The Word for World is Forest, 1976
Tom Mouse, 2002
Unlocking the Air and Other Stories, 1996
Very Far Away from Anywhere Else, 1976
Voices, 2006
Wild Angels, 1975
Wild Oats and Fireweed, 1988
Wonderful Alexander and the Catwings, 1994
The most recent letter/e-mail that can find that I wrote to you was dated 3 August 2007, so it’s been a while. I’m afraid that I am not good at being a regular correspondent; writing comes hard for me, since I always want to rewrite everything I’ve written over and over again, like Balzac, only without Balzac’s talent.

There are two reasons for my stalling for so long. First, I had more or less promised you an article on Iain M. Banks’s Culture and its plausibility, but I haven’t written it yet. I haven’t written our supposedly annual newsletter to our friends either, which usually helps me organise my thoughts to some extent, but so it goes.

Last January (in 2008) I had surgery on my left shoulder, which put me out of both writing and computer usage for a few weeks (since I’m left-handed). In March I became Treasurer for Cartoonists Northwest, a fairly informal and loose association of professional and amateur cartoonists, animators and humorous illustrators based in Seattle, for which I contributed my magnificent ability to add two numbers together and frequently get the same result. I also keep track of the mailing list; we publish a monthly newsletter, Penstuff, which I will send to you at some point.

In April, I started my first regular job of some
years. I now work part time (15 to 20 hours a week) as a clerk in a small, local independent video store a few blocks from our house. The owner likes to have an enormous variety of films in his shop, including many classics, foreign films and documentaries; so for the first and only time in my life I am able to use my college degree (in Film Studies) in my employment ... The clientele is almost all people from the neighbourhood, which can be a lot of fun.

Since I last wrote, I finished Iain M. Banks’s *Excession*, and also Hayford Pierce, *The Thirteenth Majestral*; Iain M. Banks, *Consider Phlebas*; and Richard Morgan, *Market Forces*. This last novel I particularly enjoyed, as its view of the future I felt to be grimly realistic in a one-sided sort of way, with its depiction of the sharpening divisions in class society in England (and elsewhere). It is written as a black satire on the culture of corporate capitalism, and is quite effective. Its main shortcoming, common in apocalyptic novels, is that it fails to show the opposition and rebellion from within, from the working classes, that would develop against such a system. (The novel does show the opposition and rebellion from without, so to speak, in the form of a Che-like leader from Latin America, Barranco.)

The other reason that I hadn’t written is that I was a little miffed that *SET* 8 hadn’t printed that part of my reply to Janine’s remark ‘There are different definitions of “Marxist”, too.’ Well, I did say that none of my reply needed to see print, so long as you showed her my earlier e-mail about it that I had sent you; I have no one to blame but myself for saying that (unless I write something to you along the lines of, ‘How dare you do what I ask you to do?’). Beyond that, the purpose of *SET* does not seem to be political polemics, unless incidental to the reading and criticism of SF. So I was being unfair on two counts.

Anyhow, I just received *SET* 9 not too long ago, and I read George Zebrowski’s article, ‘Standing up for science-fiction: Stanislaw Lem (1921–2006)’ with great interest — Lem being, as you know, probably my very favourite writer of SF, despite his shortcomings (I’m thinking here mostly of his views on women, which were quite as backward as those of any nineteenth-century misogynist, as well as his dismissal of Marxism, which he — like most of the rest of the world — only knew from Stalinist official dogma). Well, nobody’s perfect.

I also enjoyed your article, ‘A true original: Thomas M. Disch (1940–2008)’, which I need to re-read. Disch is a writer I both respect and enjoy (although, unlike Lem, there is too much of his work that I have not yet read), but who, like Lem, was a difficult person. My favorite bit from your article reads, ‘To dislike Disch on principle and give automatic praise to the works of some other writers ... you would have to believe that fiction is provided as a sort of mushy baby food to comfort and cheer up its readers. You would have to believe that science and other types of knowledge are just branches of nineteenth-century positivist technology: that the only purpose of ideas is to give us faster cars and more exciting spaceships ... that a writer should never depress readers or put a pin through that fluffy cloud of nothingness that comprises most modern thought.’

13 February 2009

**PAUL ANDERSON**
**17 Baker Street, Grange, SA 5022**

I have far too many books that should be read. Just reordered 80 per
cent of the library, but keep finding As and Bs, etc that need fitting in — somehow. Probably won’t, though, until the next onslaught. How do you keep yours in order? I find it is fine until you actually want to read one, then it stays out of order.

Videos have a window of a day or so to get labelled, then what was recorded is in grave danger of oblivion because of the dread tapeover.

I suppose you heard that Alan Sandercock is finally getting US citizenship after a full 30-year career over there!!! I think he may stay in work for a while longer, because of the superannuation losses during the current crisis.

Downer blamed the financial meltdown on legislation put up by Democrat presidents (and forgot to mention being passed by Republican-controlled Congresses). I printed off a 40-year graph of the Dow Jones Index from the Net. Amazingly enough, every Republican president, without exception, has had at least one meltdown, and some up to three during his term. George W. scored two serious ones: the first wiped five years of growth and stopped the unbroken run of prosperity from Clinton’s eight years. Reagan scored three relatively minor ones, so his success with the Cold War was that he did more economic damage to Russia than he did to America. The SDI required a huge investment that neither he nor Carter could afford.

The share price graph shows that if you are American and want a share downturn and lose your job and house, vote Republican!

24 February 2009

*brg* We store books alphabetically by author, except for biographies, which go in alphabetically by subject. When we moved to Greensborough we filled nine walls with bookcases. We had plenty of room for everything on the shelves. It’s getting crowded now, and some will have to go in boxes after I put the next lot of books up. They are sitting in five piles on the study floor at the moment. CDs still haven’t filled their cabinet, but DVDs flow all over the place. I give away DVDs that I know I will never watch again.*

ALEX SLATE
Washington, DC

You may or may not recognise my name from way back. Jan (hopefully) should recognise my name, since I was one of the people who received Peregrine Nation at its end.

I have been, in the past, a member of the FACT Board of Directors (from when FACT put on Worldcon in San Antonio), the editor of The Texas SF Inquirer (the second editor following Pat Virzi), my own fanzine PhiloSFy, and Robots & Roadrunners (the clubzine of Ursa Major, the erstwhile San Antonio SF club). I was also one of the founders of Ursa Major — but back then it was SASFA. I currently write a mostly regular column for The Knarley Knews, and still correspond with a few other fanzines here and there.

I currently live in Washington DC. I have been here almost two years now. I will be moving to Ohio some time this summer. I was quite active in fandom from 1983 until about five years ago (or so), especially with fanzines, but only sporadically now.

4 March 2009

*JGS: Hi Alex! Sure do remember you, especially since your frequent moves had a lot in common with my fanzine’s title. *

Thank you very much for the e-mail with the notification regarding Steam Engine Time #10 — for at least two reasons. It reminded me that efanzines.com exists, and I have to remember to visit every so often.

I enjoyed reading the issue. The problem with reading modern fanzines (and many fanzines of yore as well) is that many of them are loc intensive — so unless one is familiar with ‘what has gone before’ one is sort of lost the first time or two. Now, with the earlier issues of SET available at the website, I really have no excuse, have I? But, even if one is not able to keep up with all the nuance with regard to the letters, that doesn’t necessarily make the experience of reading the zine a slog.

I, for one, still enjoy paper fanzines over electronic. Mostly, this is because I forget to check for the existence of the e-zines, being the distracted and forgetful feller I am. But I will willingly read e-zines when I get an e-mail notice like yours. I do find it marginally easier, though,
to flip back and forth through a paper fanzine, particularly as I am looking for references when writing locs. (Having two computer screens at my previous job did sort of take care of that issue as well, but I don’t have that luxury at my current job site, nor at home.) Actually, e-zines are a little more ecologically correct than paper ones, so I probably really should shut up ...

Gillian Polack noted that she was elected president of the Canberra chapter of the National Council of Jewish Women at a meeting which she did not attend. Bet ya she didn’t even know she was running ... that is typical meeting protocol. It’s how some folk get other folk to attend meetings.

Regarding Elaine Cochrane’s article on Dan Simmons’ major works: I was very much into the Hyperion and Endymion series. I gave up on the Mars series. I can’t remember whether I stopped reading on *Ilium or Olympos*. Somehow it seemed like the concept was similar to other things I had read, and it just didn’t grab me. Maybe I will give them another try.

5 March 2009

*JGS: Back when I was actually loccing fanzines, I’d keep the zine file open on one side of the monitor screen and my loc file open either beside it or below it. Worked well for me; have you tried it?*

ROBERT ELORDIETA
Unit 4, 15 High Street, Traralgon, VIC 3844

Jan, you’re right. Why doesn’t Darrell Schweitzer pitch his idea of archiving the poems on Tom Disch’s blog, and then put together a book of them, to a publisher and edit it himself? After all, Darrell seems to be a big fan of Tom Disch’s poetry.

I look forward to Jan writing some more about the *Babylon 5* series. It is one of my favourite shows. I have been lucky to have seen the whole series, the TV movies, the spin-off *Crusade*, the pilot *Legend of the Rangers* and *Babylon 5: The Lost Tales*. I have enjoyed all of them.

Leigh Edmonds’ convention report was very interesting. It was nice to see his honesty in his writing of this report. ‘I had time for a brief chat to remind me what conventions are supposed to be about (in my world...
anyhow), which is meeting people.’ That is also why I love going to conventions, to meet people.

I remember the Dickson shops and McDonald’s. I used to live in Dickson, which I left in 1981 when I was 9 years old to live in Traralgon, Victoria.

‘Overall I got the impression that conventions are no longer run by fans for the entertainment of fans but are run for the deification of people who want to become writers, perhaps big-name writers.’ I hope that is not always the case, because I am not interested in becoming a book writer, but to be entertained and to meet people. I prefer the history and traditions of science fiction, fantasy and fandom.

8 March 2009

*JGS: Thanks for the encouragement to write more about B5. Despite all the fanwriting and paid writing I’ve done in the last decade (with very few rejections), I still have trouble convincing myself I’m capable of writing cogent, interesting prose. It’s the depression talking, of course. I think I need a mantra to push that feeling away; if anyone’s got one (besides the Bene Gesserit Litany Against Fear); I’d love to hear it.

Though I’ve attended few conventions, the ones I enjoyed most were the ones where the pros didn’t spend their free time hiding from fen who’d come to see and/or hear them. When a writer can’t be bothered to speak to readers (when the readers are politely waiting, of course), that’s just rude. In that regard, politicians have more manners, though their motives might be less honest. And that’s another bag of beans for another time.*
You might be interested that the BSFA’s Vector (#258, Winter 2008) includes an article, ‘The New X: Wings of Song’ by Graham Sleight, which starts from Sleight watching a film by Eric Solstein of Disch reading his poem cycle Winter Journey, shown at Boston Readercon in July 2008, and then pulls back to look at Disch’s career as a whole. Doing so, especially in the latter years, reveals more than a little clay caked around the feet of the idol of the New Wave, a degree of vindictiveness and racial bigotry revealed online in his LiveJournal posts.

A couple of months back I chanced across a copy of Michael Chabon’s Gentlemen of the Road (2007, Sceptre), Chabon’s not so thinly disguised homage-in-part to Fritz Leiber’s Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser stories (in fact explicitly acknowledged in the Author’s Note, alongside a dedication to Michael Moorcock). Great fun, featuring a pair of twelfth-century mercenary adventurers and con men, who fall in with a gawky but silver-tongued slave who claims to be the youngest son of the dispossessed bek of the Khazars (but turns out to be something else entirely: a revelation that in hindsight shouldn’t have come as too much of a surprise had I been paying rather more attention) and an elephant who almost becomes an honorary Radhanite Jew in order to round out a prayer quorum. Andrew Weiner, in his loc to SET 9, appears to identify this book as Gentlemen with Swords, which conflates the published title — at least in the Sceptre edition — Gentlemen of the Road, with Chabon’s preferred (although unused) title, Jews With Swords.

I like the online layout of Steam Engine Time 10. Admittedly, it’s helped by having recently purchased a new 19-inch widescreen monitor.

15 March 2009

KATHLEEN JENNINGS
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It is very rainy here (we are having ‘weather’, as they say) and I arrived home from work to find SET No 10 had been rescued from the mailbox just before the deluge — between it and the latest ASIM and just finishing Do Androids Dream... (not, I hope, for the last time, although I would have thought I would have remembered a word like ‘disemelerating’), it has been a thematically cohesive day.

I missed Gillian Polack’s GoH speech at Conflux, so appreciated being able to read it at leisure and considerably better rested than at the con. I’m always impressed anew
by the depth and breadth of her knowledge and interests and her willingness to share.

_SET_ has been underlining for me the history behind where I — new to fandom — stand. I’m familiar with the tides and vicissitudes of online fandom, but its pace and emphases and trials and memories are very different from what I see in _SET_ — both gone before and continuing.

16 March 2009

DARRELL SCHWEITZER
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The new _SET_ showed up. A wonderful production as always. I can only reply that if Steve Jeffery is puzzled by the remark I made about the religious nature of much SF and why I failed to produce it more thoroughly, this may be because I was so enraptured by my own erudition that I didn’t write well enough. Or it could be that I took for granted an obvious and borrowed truism that SF does indeed, as does science, deal with matters that were formerly the exclusive domain of religion, such as origins, our place in the universe, predeterminism vs free will, the ultimate fate of our species and of the universe itself, etc. We think of _Childhood’s End_, the works of Stapledon, or for that matter, as much discussed in this issue, Zebrowski’s _Macrolife_, and so on and so on and so on. We also think of the extremely large number of SF stories about God and biblical matters. Some writers do this more than others, but there is an undercurrent in a good deal of the field which might be described as a secular rationalisation of religious subjects. Often the payoff of a story (as in Asimov’s ‘Nightfall’) is the production of a feeling of religious awe. What’s interesting about _Inferno_ is that the book starts out completely rational and secular, but then the character’s rationalism collapses into religious acceptance. This is an unexpected stance coming from either Niven or Pournelle.

To explain to Steve what is meant by ‘hand-waving’: this is an editorial term. I’ve always used it to mean going through the motions of an explanation when you don’t have one. The purpose of doing so is to reassure the reader that, yes, you thought of that too. If you have a story about humans and aliens interbreeding, you say, ‘They underwent genetic modification first.’ You (the writer) have no idea what might need to be done or how, but the purpose of this bit of hand-waving is simply to prevent the reader from saying, ‘Wait a minute! That’s ridiculous!’ Likewise Matheson, in _I Am Legend_, hand-waves his way into an explanation of vampirism by bacterium because he has no plausible method of producing ‘vampires’ scientifically and the story requires one. He is merely pretending he has one. It is a literary convention that the reader will accept this for the duration of the story. This is also known as the ‘balonium’ factor. Balonium is that substance or effect which will suspend the laws of nature as needed. _Star Trek_ could not get through an episode without it. Wells’s _The Time Machine_ runs on pure balonium too. Or hand-waving. The reason the story is science fiction and _A Christmas Carol_ (which has time-travel elements) is not is that Wells pretends that his character has discovered new physical and mechanical principles which will make the time machine possible. If Wells can do this, so can Matheson.

From the perspective of almost forty years, we can see the New Wave as a short-term failure and long-term success. In the short term, the New Wave label became commercial poison. It finished off any number of anthology series and magazines. It forced, as I have noted, a radical change in paperback cover design, so that publishers could visibly distance themselves from anything even crypto-New Wavish. It ended careers, including, I suspect, those of some ‘innocent bystanders’ like D. G. Compton and Richard Cowper, in the sense that the immediate economic impact of the New Wave was to drive the British from the American market for about fifteen years. To the American reader, particularly the less sophisticated American reader, this worked out as New Wave equals British equals Boring equals Doesn’t Sell.

Of course one of the points being made by New Wave ideologues on both sides of the Atlantic (and also in Australia I would guess) is that the American audience is too provincial and conservative. They were correct. Barry Malzberg has made the claim that science fiction is the most conservative form of literature there is, even more so than pornography. That may be an overstatement, but it does seem curious that the Literature of the Future and of New Ideas should be conservative.

This all goes back to the style-vs-content debate. SF readers are interested in content. They don’t usually care much about style, which is why they will put up with an almost subliterate writer sometimes if the ‘ideas’ are interesting. A lot of them see the narrative simply as a vehicle for delivering the ‘story,’ and so any form of ‘narrative’ which interferes
with this is rejected. This is not entirely a fannish perception. I believe it was Clifton Fadiman who once described Faulkner as using ‘anti-narrative’, which he defined as ‘a series of literary techniques which prevent the story from being told’. The New Wave often presented bits of incomprehensible gibberish which had no idea content at all, much less the form of vicarious, shared experience which is what involves the reader emotionally in a story. These were just dead wordage on the page, the very thing for which I coined the term ‘non-functional word pattern’ (I am amused to see this term getting into circulation) to describe.

So in that sense all the New Wave did was condition the audience to avoid the New Wave, and by association, anything British that wasn’t by Arthur Clarke.

But in the long term, the effect it had on writers who grew up during the New Wave era was more positive. It showed them that there actually were more possibilities in the form. It added to the number of ‘off the shelf’ tools any writer could reach for. For example I once wrote a story in which there were a series of scenes going forward in the usual chronological order interspersed with a series of flashbacks, each of which was further back in time than the previous one. The result was that there were two streams of narration going in opposite directions from a central point (a traumatic event for the characters). Now, in the New Wave era that would probably have been regarded as an ‘experimental’ story. I didn’t think of it as one, because I had learned that the form of the short story was a little more flexible than one might gather from reading the late Campbell Analog. Roger Zelazny in particular made us aware of the musical effects you could get with language. A lot of writers of my generation went through a ‘Zelazny period’, I suspect, in which they imitated him shamelessly.
Nevertheless, a lot of fans have still not gotten the message. I participated in a fan discussion of Kelly Link’s *Magic for Beginners* collection not all that long ago, in which most people went on at length about how ‘experimental’ and ‘avant-garde’ (and ‘difficult’) these stories were. I didn’t see it myself. They also complained that a lot of them ‘had no plot’ or weren’t ‘stories’ at all. It sounded like the New Wave debates all over again, although now I was on the other side of the fence. I found myself trying to outline precisely how a story like ‘The Faery Handbag’ has a plot, with conflict, rising action, a climax, etc. Kelly Link strikes me as a witty, inventive writer with a charming narrative voice who uses a series of off-the-shelf tricks we should all be familiar with.

About the cyberpunks: What Bill Gibson did was invent a new SF trope. He was genuinely responding to societal changes and the birth of cyberculture, exactly as a science fiction writer should. This was genuinely new content, something that doesn’t come along in SF as often as we’d like. But the form through which he chose to deliver this content was quite tried and true, with elements of the thirties noir detective story, the action story, and so on. Most importantly, he emphasised, rather than abandoned, the element of story itself, which is why he and his followers became popular and didn’t meet the fate of the New Wavers. An exciting story with interesting characters will beat a non-functional word pattern any time.

When you really get right down to it, there are many aspects of storytelling which have not changed since the invention of prose narration itself. I suspect the big shift was when prose went from something to be read aloud to something read on the page (although it still could be read aloud). The interspersing of description, action and dialogue is not all that different in *The Golden Ass* of Apuleius (late second century) from what you might find in a modern novel. Certainly, the English novel has only developed new tropes and flourishes since the eighteenth century, when it really came into its own, but the basic principle that you hold the reader’s interest by *telling a story* has not changed, nor is it likely to.

Linking the eighteenth-century novel to Apuleius, we note that Defoe’s *Moll Flanders* goes through endless racy adventures, but at the end the character reforms and gives up her sinful ways — in her sixties, which was very old for the time — which was a satirical and winking way of saying, ‘No, reader, this is not a naughty book. Look, it’s very moral.’
The Golden Ass uses a similar strategy, although possibly with more sincerity. All the racy and outrageous episodes morph into a salvation story, as the hero calls on Isis to extract him from his difficulties and turns pious in the last couple chapters. Aside from that, and some of the more sexually explicit stuff, there’s not much in The Golden Ass that, in suitably 1940s dress, could not have occurred in a lead novel in Unknown.

George Zebrowski says the Walker edition of Solaris is worth $3000. Gee, I’m glad I was on the Walker review list at the time. I am old enough now that I can go to the dealer room at any convention and see books I just got as books, not as fabulous collector’s items, for prices that make me realise how rich I really am. I ran a search on Abebooks.com. George does not exaggerate by much. I can’t find any $3000 copies, but there is one at $2500, and the beat-up, ex-library copies start in the hundreds of dollars, which means a seriously valuable book, comparable to the Doubleday Nine Princes In Amber or the Putnam To Your Scattered Bodies Go. Who would have thought it? I’ll have you know that I wrote a favourable review at the time in a fanzine, but I doubt this had much impact. I was a nobody and it wasn’t even a prominent fanzine. But there was an appreciative response by Franz Rottensteiner.

*brg* My copy of the Walker edition of Solaris is annotated with my copious notes. Justin Ackroyd likes to say that this would increase the value of the copy, but I doubt it. I just wish I could remember what I was trying to say to myself back in 1971 when I wrote those notes.*

Solaris actually demonstrates very well what is meant by ‘content’ versus ‘form.’ I can’t read Polish. The people who can (notably Michael Kandel; we discussed this in an interview) tell me that in Polish Solaris is a very witty book, with musical effects in the prose which cannot be translated. In English, in the Walker translation at least, it is a rather sombre, ponderous, slow book that builds fascination from the situation and premise it develops. The sentient ocean of Solaris is one of the great creations of SF. This idea content, and the poignant love story that develops logically from it, come through to the English reader despite, not because of, the style in which (in translation) the story is written.

I appreciated the Dan Simmons section. Of course very few of us ever think of the correct thing to say at the moment, but the proper reply to that editor’s question ‘Why would anyone be interested in reading about people who’ve been dead for 150 years?’ would be, ‘Of course you are right. Books about people long dead will never sell. Now I understand why Gone With The Wind and I, Claudius were such commercial failures.’

Now we know why the publishing industry is in such a bad way.

18 March 2009

SHERYL BIRKHEAD
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SETs 9 and 10: lovely covers (say — do the compliments get old?)

I apologise that I have not kept track of the exact date, but I think the state of Virginia has set aside a day in June as Murray Leinster day — I’m not sure exactly what they are naming the day.

I was just reading along about Conflux 5 and noticed the photo lower right on page 7 which made me blink several times, not at the subject or composition but at the credit: ‘Jean Weber. Photo: Jean Weber’. Made me stop and think ‘self-portrait?’ Sounds as if you enjoyed yourself at Conflux, Bruce. Here’s a toast to the hope that your financial situation allows this to be a more frequent happening.

*brg* Not in 2009, unfortunately. I’m told that the star of this year’s Conflux was Sydney artist Nick Stathopoulos, whose birthday was celebrated in grand style.*

One of the local chain stores, Circuit City, is going out of business. I was looking for prices on flat-screen TVs (large sizes to me, probably rather small by everyone else’s standards) and happened to find its last copy of Wall-E on sale. So, I have seen the movie.
The start was terrific and the ending was good. Uh ... I fell asleep during the middle (not a particularly good sign) and need to go look at it again to see what I think about the middle. That said, I thought the movie was so well done ... that the soundtrack was amazing — considering that at least the two parts I mention were, essentially, wordless.

I was prowling the audio book racks at two different public libraries, looking for some science fiction that was more recent than about 20 years ago ... no such luck. If I want to actually read more recent SF I am going to have to find some extra hours in the day or stop reading the professional journals. It looks as if the professional journals win.

The US version of Life on Mars, I am told, has been cancelled. I enjoy the show, and my only hope is that its producers had enough notice to do wrapping- (and mopping-) up episodes so things will be resolved. Other TV SF I watch is marginal at best (I mean the SF is marginal, not the watching). I look at the insightful articles you manage to get and wish I had something more creative to say.

Jan comments on her son’s reading. I have friends who have six kids. They have two boys: one likes Star Wars and the other likes dragons. As far as I can tell, this relates to movies and not necessarily books. I do my part: for birthdays and other holidays I try to find an inexpensive book that sort of dovetails with their interests and my hope to get them reading — or I give a gift card from the closest bookstore. I don’t know yet if this subtle coercion is working.

Glad to see that Jan and her son are doing better — a long road, but it sounds as if it feels comfortable.

Thank you for sharing the Conflux 5 speech. You did mention fan history, and this is part of it! I am hoping the saga will continue.

Ah, this way I can go ahead and mail this... and work on some fillos as soon as I can.

26 March–3 April 2009

*brg* Sheryl offered to send some money for her copies of Steam Engine Time. I pointed out that I am sending them in the hope she will send me more of her cartoons. She was very modest about them, although lots of fanzine editors use them. She does not have a handy computer program to scan her pieces of art and send them by email. She is willing to trace her originals.*

MARTIN MORSE WOOSTER
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Many thanks for Steam Engine Time 10. I suspect I can outdo Darrell Schweitzer in my reading of Dhalgren. I read it because one member of my book club picked the book. (This guy, when I first met him 25 years ago, wanted to be the Kid in Dhalgren; now he’s a handsomely paid economist.) I dutifully took it with me to a meeting for drinks at the Cosmos Club, a snooty private club in Washington. Before the meeting, I ended up reading a chapter with 25 pages of moderately graphic gay sex. I finished the chapter, walked in to the gilded palace of the great and the good, and thought to myself, ‘My goodness! I bet this isn’t the sort of thing members here read!’ and then had my meeting.

Dhalgren is the only Delany novel I’ve read, but it works because Delany did not stint on the storytelling. Dhalgren does not present a world in which I would want to live, and I can’t say I enjoyed the book, but it was nonetheless readable and held my interest. My understanding is that at some point Delany went over the cliff and became unreadable. I don’t think Delany (unlike Heinlein) has enough fans to determine when he went bad. But Dhalgren is still readable and hasn’t dated.

I did see the film Australia in a real theatre; it has some lovely images, but none of the characters is believable and the plot is intensely silly. But why is Bruce Gillespie ‘lazy about watching films in real cinemas?’ One of the enduring pleasures of fandom is getting fans together to watch a new film (preferably based on a novel) and then have
lunch. I was particularly proud of my invitation for *Children of Men*, which
was a meeting of the Silver Spring Depressing Science Fiction Film
Society, which only sees films that are science fiction, foreign, depressing
and life-denying. ‘WARNING! I announced in my email. ‘This film REEMS
with FUTILITY and DESPAIR. But afterwards we’ll go to lunch and feel
better.’ We got 12 people, and ended up taking over a table at a nearby
Chinese buffet and argued for three hours. It was a very good day.

*brg* What a cheering comment! I should set up the Melbourne
Depressing Science Fiction Film Society (if I had the energy). Not
that I will admit that *Children of Men* is depressing. It’s about a
bloke who does his best to wrest some slight bit of hope from a
world that is itself in a state of futility and despair. The film itself
has more energy and life than any ten other SF films put to-
gether.*

I very much enjoyed Colin Steele’s article. What an amiable fellow he is.
I’m sure he makes a fine reviewer. I would hope you would, in a future
article, get him to talk about his collection, the sorts of SF he collects,
and the authors he knows. And he reminds us that, while used bookstores
are receding before the relentless creative destruction of the Net, that
there’s still a great deal of pleasure wandering a bookstore or a good
university library with open stacks — and being pleasantly surprised by
finding a book you didn’t know you were looking for.

10 April 2009

CHRISS NELSON
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*brg* I wrote on Fictionmags recently: ‘George Turner was
famous in fandom long before he wrote his first word of science
fiction. His first critical articles, in *Australian Science Fiction
Review* in 1967, put him on the map...’* Chris replied:

George Turner’s litcrit of SF started long before then. From his letter in
the January 1940 *Astounding*: ‘I read my first stf. story when I was nine.
[Precocious brat.] At the stalwart manhood of eleven or thereabouts I
was complaining that the authors couldn’t write. I used to write furious
letters to Hugo Gernsback about it.’
thing approaching dizzyly, and in July attaining, in the quiet manor, that diurnal heart-pleaser... you talk of the nameless poetesses. Schopenhauer's dominant conceit had it, as did Pushkin's utopia, that a man cannot separate the lifting of science fiction from the cut of the suit and the harring of your authors have left behind.

Nadezhda T. has never painted his own thing. To my mind, one of the most important losses of the past year is the exclusion of one of the most distinguished artists of Russia. It is true the coffins were there, but that's why... Art, not the State, is making the attempt to transcend the ideology of 'October'.

Just as in October, 1917, Kollontay's hi-men involved for the discussion of 'Freudian Treatise'... and Ger-ken's quaint little blueprints for the complete discussion of 'War Against the Engagement'.

Oh, yes, some dreadful things have happened this year in the fair name of art. For instance, Cartier has happened. Foil him to the power of thirty. Better, the man either can't or won't give an answer! For a deep of Mr. Morthen's. True, art is not a conscious thing, but how humbly down with reverence toward the source of all. Something has happened! The bears are no longer content to have the lions teaching to write:

After all these years! I've watched science fiction grow from the first Gernsback issue back in 1926, when we were young and thought a molecule was either an atom, a disease or a new kind of transfiguration. I read my first story at the age of nine. (Precisely five stories were necessary for advancement of eleven or thereabouts I was considering that the 'direct writing' method to write short letters in Hugo Gernsback's about it.]

Now, I take you out of the book. Most of them can't write yet, but the lions are not going to take it. Particularly the bears, the knights, the ogres.

All things considered, it has been an erection and a religion... and checked by reference to the Analytical Laboratory, useful to the independent good discussion efforts by boys who want to write a good story and think the money is out of it. Science fiction is the city and they have it at heart; and it is less everywhere anywhere in the world's literary race, they will be the problem... I love you, Van Vogt, Bernhart, Phillip, Del Rey, Gregory, Engels, E. E.(

So much for the good times. But we've had another one. All of the 38th year of Street & Smith's ownership with that year's worst.

Now I've got something I really can get my teeth into. It is a novel that rubbed me up about nine wrong ways at once.

In a word, a master. Like the unprofessed Mr. van Lorn, Wellers, I have to admit, with an idea.

What a pity! Like the respectable Mr. Schacht, with his essentially popular "Past, Present and Future" series, he has tried to mix half-baked science with quarter-baked political idealism. A cause for national nausea—eighty-four hour Sunday—anything to make me forget.

Let me put it into words as near to one syllable as this kind of business will allow me.

First of all, it requires an artist to put over one syllable. Mr. Wellers could write like Mr. Wells or Mr. Van Vogt, but the idea was good.

But pick your horse in the first race.

For instance, one assumes that the mental standard of the time, through not in all as grey as the arrogance of some of the characters would have no effect. Also, it was assumed that World War would have never been allowed to happen. The planetary wars, if they were as scared of each other as Wellers went to such pains to make them, would have elected a combined geographical committee to cure the planet, to unite them. Or, more probably, they would have had a lovely, but not so exciting, and sinister war as the screen everywhere for Mr. Wellers' detection.

They certainly wouldn't have changed any one world setting it.

And the United expedition, of course, the envenoming giggle in this edition of domestic horror. The man really didn't want to think he could get away with such a place. His limitations to the author's imagination, even with all the world of science which Wellers' amazement ability to take care of the enforcement of his action.


The next arrival on planet was Mr. Houdin with one from the landing craft or whatever he was on. (Houdin also included the Eerthians and the incessant cackles and the comical cackles as ever climax to martians. He then claims that the Eerthians, ever since the last war, have left the planet vacant, and claims it in the same way.

Even if they didn't bother to murder the man, say second-rate, then too, they would have been able to get me, so far as they can. Nothing fresh or exciting, it is true. But it is fresh and exciting. It takes more than one bright idea to make a story. Too many people assume that one original thought will excite and eliminate any amount of subsequent sharp writing and clever thinking.

In the same issue the stories were merely fair, not good enough to confuse the taste of "Fries Must Burn" series. And far ahead of them, picturing a possible future, of course. Of course.

But "Ether Brothers" belonged more to the Eerthians, being hardly weaker than presented as science fiction and "Savages". I'll be just as neat with it, I am finding as if it did to an obvious climax and dull ending.

"The Last Hope," on the other hand, is a breath of inspiration. For instance, that other thoroughly squabbled upon, that was a classic example of the story setting out to sell an idea, and getting away with it. More Dan France!

General Strang

Yet, vast was good, unpretentious, solid fare, very satisfying after the slightly indigestible offcuts of the shorts.

The article—a poor effort, still, even for him all.

In spite of this issue, the general tone of the 38-39 year has been prevalent, seven-dime adventure reaching a new high in the new corn—the right here—"With Cupola, Sir," nearly talking it again with "Black Destination" and "Black Flight."

An interesting new town's changes has been, with the emergence of new stars, a simple thing. "No matter what doesn't stand the test of a perfectly constructed fiction. But last the doublewhites are leaving us—namely Pearls and van Lorn-uncertainly.

practically unnoticed. Schachtner does not see the light any more, nor Gallun. But these two can occasionally do good work, and Gallun, at any rate, has it in him to become a master of that nostalgic prose which so well suits some themes. Remember "Old Faithful?" But he got too facile with it, and slipped down the road to the "Seeds of the Dust" and "Fires of Genesis."

This careless facility is so much a besetting sin with stff. authors. But this new crop of young masters will show the old hands a thing or two before another year is.

But it is another who's ability goes hidden because he has to write at top speed to be sure of the things and everywhere for something. He turns out in-credibilities of a J. R. Fearnman order in people like Parsons and McNab, writes a psychological mess like "Done in Oil" at nearly three times the necessary length, or, again, a wily, badly informed piece of pseudo-historical claptrap like "The Trapper." Yet he, too, when the fit is on him can write.

This Toppy's the letter has grown. Two thousand words of fulmination and flatness. Well, it's too long ever to get into Brass Tacks, so I will just content from under the hope that you, at any rate, being a kind-hearted guy—spread on the jam. George, spread on the jam—will have struggled thus far. For the end is in sight.

I want to throw just one last bouquet. A small one, but very lovely and rare with old. To Arthur McCann, for those fascinating little articles that pop out at one from odd corners and make page turning quite an adventure in case there should be one just over the leaf.

And a bunch of geraniums for Sprague de Camp. A most irritatingly knowledgeable man, but possessed of the kind of brains that astounding needs to tell it off occasionally. I'm proud to be a fellow man with him.

And that really does finish me off for a while. Good luck to you, John Campbell, and thanks for a great year.

Yours till the Cosmic Engineers take over—George R. Turner, 32 George Street, Fitzroy, N. 6, Melbourne, Australia.
His earliest letters were not published, but he had two in the July 1932 *Amazing*.

10 January 2010

Here you are Bruce: a scan of George’s early letter. I’ll be checking more *Amazing* lettercols the next time I get to Fisher Library.

Would you know if there is going to be a fanhistory stream at the worldcon?

13 January 2010

*brg* The great news is that Aussiecon 4 has found a volunteer to run the fanhistorical stream for the convention. More details later.*

PATRICK McGUIRE
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I retired some months ago. This was voluntary, and had nothing to do with the recession, except that the crash, coming as it did only a few months before my scheduled exit date, made me very nervous for a while, before I decided that despite everything I could afford to go ahead with my plans to become a gentleman of leisure. In theory, retirement should give me lots of time for fanac, but the theory has been slow to turn into reality. I went through two rounds of flu (which, including convalescence, knocked out two months for most activities more demanding than reading books) and I found I had a backlog of household chores that had accumulated over a period of years, and which I am still working through. To cap it all, I probably just needed a rest after thirty-something years in the salt mines. I could not even muster enough interest in the Montreal Worldcon to plan in good time to attend, which is why I am presently home writing this, and not in Quebec.

However, I am gradually digging out from under. As I had been vaguely planning to do for years, I finally bought a laptop computer to supplement my ancient desktop model. My old computer was working well enough for the amount of time I was spending on it pre-retirement, and I correctly had concluded that learning to operate updated hardware and software would constitute a huge time sink. Once I took the plunge, it required about a month before I even started to get comfortable with my new acquisition, and the machine still does things every few days that baffle me; sometimes I figure out what’s happening. Once masterered, the laptop should allow me to read downloaded fanzines fairly comfortably in softcopy, in an easy chair with my feet up rather than in an office chair at my desk. (Indeed, I am currently so reading and loccing, although not yet ‘comfortably’.) Adobe Reader has a ‘Pan & Zoom’ feature that works fairly well in navigating SET’s pages at a reasonable magnification. However, despite recent changes such as the landscape layout, I still think that SET remains pretty much optimised for hard copy, and that you ought to reconsider this in light of your decision to make soft copy the primary means of distribution. It is obvious from the lettercol that much of your readership is, like me, greying fast, and nearly all this segment probably is, like me, using some sort of text zoom when reading on screen. Two columns admittedly work much better on screen than would one wide column that ran beyond the edge of a magnified screen, but even at a modest 140 per cent zoom, one has to read two screens downward, then move to the right half of the page, jump to the page top, and read another two screens downward. I don’t think there is any way in .pdf format to allow lines to rewrap when enlarged, so you might want to consider shifting to another standard that would permit a single-column format that would rewrap to stay inside the screen if enlarged. I’m not enough of a computer person to know what the best alternative would be, but I note that Wikipedia pages, for instance, rewrap their lines nicely when text is resized, but do permit profuse illustration and usually look reasonable when printed out, so perhaps something like their format would work for you. Of course, if I execute the next part of my vague technology plans, I will buy a laser printer, after which I could even print out downloaded .pdf fanzines at a reasonable per-page cost.

*brg* My strong prejudice is still toward the print version, although the PDF version appears first. I don’t really believe the magazine exists until I put the paper copies in the mail. Re the screen version: If I changed to HTML format, I would lose all the layout and font features of the current layout. I’m a bit puzzled by your problem, though, as the double-page spread is very readable on my 19-inch monitor. But you do say you are now attempting to read pages on a laptop screen.*

In Bruce’s Guest of Honour speech, he recalls having read *A Princess of
Mars as a child, and finding it worthwhile despite its multiple glaring scientific impossibilities. I would recommend to Bruce’s attention two recent S. M. Stirling books, *The Sky People* and *In the Courts of the Crimson Kings*. These are set in an alternate universe where Stirling makes something very like the Burroughs Mars and Venus books scientifically plausible, which for starters requires extraterrestrial intervention 200 million years ago to terraform both planets, followed by repeated transplants to the other worlds of Earthly flora and fauna, including humans. Stirling does his usual outstanding job in working out the sociological implications of the changes he has posited, and writes an uncanny imitation of *Encyclopedia Britannica* house style in his interpolated encyclopedia articles explaining features of the alternate reality. He also throws in Burroughs jokes. The hero of the Mars book is named Wainman, a wainman being the same thing as a carter. At one point one character (I can’t recall if it is Wainman or the hero of the Venus book) thinks back to an archeological excavation early in his career, of a cave in Arizona — from the description, obviously the cave (or its analogue in an alternate universe) from which John Carter departed for Barsoom. Actually it is arguably a failure of verisimilitude that the character himself does not recognise this parallel, since in his universe the Burroughs books and other planetary romances are universally read classics, because of their uncanny prediction in general terms of what turned out to be the reality of Mars and Venus. I found the two books hugely enjoyable, to the point that, despite having already read one of the two from the public library, I bought it when it appeared in paperback, so as to have them both at hand for repeated rereading. I find it a pity that Stirling seems to be having more sales success with his fantasy than with his often brilliant science fiction.

*brg* I read all the Burroughs Mars books several times before I was twelve, and hence found it astonishing when I joined fandom to discover that adult readers admired and read them. I never did take seriously John Carter’s telepathic transport method. Even in Grade 4 I knew it was not scientific. But I did recognise that in nearly all the books Burroughs included some rattlingly good SF ideas. My favourite was the little head (in *The Chessmen of Mars*) that runs around by itself on little legs (rather like the Magic Pudding in Norman Lindsay’s famous Australian children’s book of the same name), and only attaches itself to the rest of its body when it needs it.*

*I may or may not get around to retroactively loccing SET 9, but since the article there on Chabon is mentioned in the lettercol of SET 10, I will say now that I learned from *Wikipedia* that Chabon grew up partly in Columbia, Maryland, where I live. Columbia is a planned town built on former farmland and woodland, starting in the 1960s; only recently, after weathering various housing-market downturns, has it reached its originally targeted size of 100,000 or so. I mentioned my discovery of Chabon’s local roots to a friend, who, as it turned out, already knew it. He said that Chabon had stated in a radio interview the experience of seeing whole neighborhoods emerge from near-empty land had influenced his envisioning of the same process in *The Yiddish Policeman’s Union*. 

*Mentions in the lettercol of Bruce’s SET 9 Canberra convention, which latter included accounts of Bruce playing tourist in the national capital, inspire me to say that one of the things on my to-do list for my new leisure time (if it ever materialises!) is to visit or revisit the tourist sites in the US capital (an hour or so south of here), on the theory that I will probably be moving out of the area eventually and that I should take advantage of the location while I am still here. One tends not to go sightseeing near home unless one is escorting visitors, and there are many local places I haven’t seen in decades, and some I haven’t seen at all. Up to August, this 2009 Northern Hemisphere summer has been more bearable locally than last year was, but last year is more typical of the pattern, and so for the long term I am strongly considering moving somewhere cooler, but where the snow is manageable, or at least where it is someone else’s job to plough and shovel it.*
In the lettercol, John Hertz refers to Darrell Schweitzer’s *SET* 9 article on Niven and Pournelle’s *Inferno*. Thus cued in, I went back to the earlier issue and read Darrell’s excellent piece. As it happens, I recently reread *Inferno* and read the recent sequel, *Escape from Hell*. Between books, Pournelle, the co-author with most of the theological input, had converted to (Roman) Catholicism. Even the original *Inferno* could be interpreted in a way consistent with Catholic orthodoxy, and things get touched up a little further in *Escape from Hell* to make this consistency more overt. If you get out, what you thought was Hell was really only a non-contiguous part of Purgatory, as Tasmania is of Australia. Moreover, Niven and Pournelle do not assert that absolutely everybody will get out of Hell/Purgatory, the universalism that was the main ground on which Origenism was condemned. The co-authors do also include a disclaimer, as did Lewis in *The Great Divorce*, that they are writing a work of fiction, not of theology, and that their artistic images should not be taken literally. One thing that did strike me on this rereading was that, while still in materialist mode, Carpentier should have considered more seriously the possibility that Hell was not an artificially constructed Inferno-land but instead some sort of illusion — whether one running on meatware (direct input to the brain bypassing the senses through electrodes or some sort of telepathy) or on hardware, with Carpentier’s consciousness (or a copy or posthumous reconstruction of it) uploaded to a computer. This idea has gotten a lot of additional elaboration in the years after Carpentier died in the mid 1970s, so it plausibly would not bulk quite as large in his mind as it does in that of the twenty-first-century reader, but there were plenty of examples of the it-was-all-an-illusion theme in SF even prior to Carpentier’s death; the idea had even reached a mass audience in several episodes of *Star Trek Classic*. If memory serves, in *Interno* Carpentier does momentarily entertain the illusion hypothesis, but quickly decides that it is unpragmatic to accept it even provisionally. If the novel were being rewritten from scratch today, I think it would be necessary, in order to accurately reflect the psychology of a hard-SF writer, at least to play with the illusion hypothesis at a little more length.

I found Gillian Polack’s Guest of Honour speech extremely interesting. The only thing of hers that I remember seeing hitherto was her Cordwainer Smith article in *SET* 5, with which I took issue in several aspects. The speech gave her a chance to present a more human side of herself. The two of us turn out to have some career similarities, in that I emerged with a PhD just a few years earlier than she, and discovered that the academic job market in my field had dried up, leaving the civil service as my best prospect. I wasn’t aware of Polack’s fiction writing. I’m not positive I’d enjoy her fiction, but I may give it a try. I’m pretty certain that, ten or fifteen years ago, I saw in a mystery bookstore a book-length guide to writing medieval mysteries that probably covered part of the same ground as Polack’s unpublished medieval-fiction bible; Polack may already know if it. It sounds as if Polack’s project is more comprehensive. I would probably buy a copy of her projected guide, not out of any ambition to write in the period, but just to gratify general curiosity and perhaps to improve my mental images as I read novels and histories set in the Middle Ages.

In college and grad school I took some courses with substantial feminist content, and I remember that one of the points made in one of the readings was that although a typical defect of men is excessive selfishness, more typical of women is inadequate regard for self. For historical reasons society has, or at least until very recently had, more mechanisms to discourage selfishness than lack of proper self-regard. (I don’t think English even has a good single word for the latter concept.) I’ve heard the same point about female excessive unselfishness made, although generally somewhat more obliquely, by feminists ever since, so it seems ironic that it took fifteen years for Polack the feminist advocate to realise what she was doing. But then, few of us are very good at seeing into our own characters.

I enjoyed Elaine Cochrane’s Dan Simmons article. It reaffirmed my previous judgment that I had no interest in reading any more Simmons, but I often enjoy reading critical articles about authors I would not read myself. Elaine also provides evidence that can be used to show that the late Ross Pavlac was the winner in a lettercol dispute he and I had circa the early 1990s. Ross maintained that in the two ‘Hyperion’ books, Simmons showed himself to be anti-Christian. I contended that, although it looked that way at the moment, there was clearly a divergence of views among characters, and it was possible that in the long run the viewpoint of the Christians would come out on top. Since I had decided on grounds such as lack of internal consistency and factual accuracy that I had no interest in reading more Simmons, this whole matter slipped my mind, and I never even bothered to look up discussions of subsequent books in *Wikipedia* or some such place to see what evidence the later works provided. But Elaine’s comments convince me that Ross was right. (Okay,
if you want to get technical, it could be argued that Ross did not have
the evidence and just guessed right, so I was not necessarily wrong at
the time, but Ross’s position was vindicated by the subsequent novels.)

I found George Zebrowski’s article on Lem’s Solaris interesting on
grounds similar to Elaine’s on Simmons. I remember reacting very
enthusiastically to the novel, even though the first English version was,
as I recall, a translation of a translation. I must have been still an
undergraduate when I even wrote the committee of the next Worldcon
and suggested Solaris would be worthy of a special award. In those
smaller and cosier days someone actually wrote back, pointing out that
Hugo eligibility depended on date of English-language publication, so that
Solaris was a candidate for a regular award in the year after the upcoming
convention. However, far too many Lem novels following Solaris repeated
the same pattern of having humanity come up against a mystery that it
was incapable of solving. I was willing to concede that this might be a
political statement in a Communist-dominated society where it was
claimed that Marxism-Leninism had all the answers, but it was a formula
that rapidly ceased to speak to my condition. I don’t know to what extent
Lem’s subsequent pontifications on the inferiority of Western SF were
something forced on him politically (Polish writers could get away with
more than could Soviet writers, but they could not get away with
everything) and how much was generated by his own difficult personality,
but Lem certainly did not go out of his way to make himself welcome in
the Western genre-SF community. He probably did not care, especially
considering how much he was lionised by the Western mainstream
literary establishment. He was also much admired in the Soviet Union
and perhaps in other Communist countries, where much of the range of
Western SF was banned by the censors and he had less competition, and
where in any case he may have had more resonance with even regular
SF readers for one reason or another.

I have stopped donating to certain charities when I found that, in their
newsletters, instead of confining themselves to outlining what they were
doing with donated money to improve life in the Third World, they insisted
on first explaining what is wrong with the West in general and the United
States in particular. (I had no trouble finding replacement charities doing
the same sort of work but without this compulsion to denounce.) Ian
Watson begins his introduction to Macrolife with a similar jeremiad on
the state of contemporary publishing and of societal literary values in
general, and he thoroughly had my hackles up by the time, pages later,
that he finally said something about the novel he was supposed to be
introducing. Despite this unpromising beginning, he provides enough
information about the novel to suggest to me that I may have overlooked
an important work. I’ll look for it. Ironically, I actually agree with parts
of Watson’s socioliterary criticism, but it is inappropriately placed and
intemperately expressed.

Until I have read the novel I have no comment on Zebrowski’s own
afterword, so I will close here.

17 August 2009

We also heard from:

Leigh Edmonds: ‘I haven’t had time to read through much of SET 10.
This Tax Office history is starting to get up steam and takes up most of
my time. Hopefully we will catch up with you at a convention later in the
year’; James Allen, who with Helena Binns was inducted as a Lifetime
Member of the Melbourne Science Fiction Club this year (‘I don’t need a
paper copy. I like it as a PDF with colour photos and formatted for the
screen’); Franz Rottensteiner: ‘I am still considering whether I should
allow you to publish my letter on Lem, but perhaps I will write some fuller
memoirs on Lem’ — see the latest Scratch Pad (also on efanzines.com)
for recent personal news from Franz in Austria; Carol Kewley: ‘Thanks
for using my illos; it encourages me’; and John Douglas, ace New York
SF editor, who has already sent some comments on my Best Of lists, which
will be published in Steam Engine Time 12: he recommends
Scottish crime writer Christopher Brookmyre, as do I.

— Bruce Gillespie (*brg*) and Jan Stinson (*JGS*), January 2010