On the Writing
of Speculative Fiction

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There are nine-and-sixty ways
Of constructing tribal lays
And every single one of them is right
--RUDYARD KIPLING

There are at least two principal ways to write speculative fiction--write about people, or write about gadgets. There are other ways; consider Stapledon's *Last and First Men,* recall S. Fowler Wright's *The World Below.* But the gadget story and the human-interest story comprise most of the field. Most science fiction stories are a mixture of the two types, but we will speak as if they were distinct--at which point I will chuck the gadget story aside, dust off my hands, and confine myself to the human-interest story, that being the sort of story I myself write. I have nothing against the gadget story--I read it and enjoy it--it's just not my pidgin. I am told that this is a how-to-do-it symposium; I'll stick to what I know how to do.

The editor suggested that I write on "Science Fiction in the Slicks." I shan't do so because it is not a separate subject. Several years ago Will F. Jenkins said to me, I'll let you in on a secret, Bob. Any story--science fiction, or otherwise--if it is well written, can be sold to the slicks." Will himself has proved this, and so have many other writers-- Wylie, Wells, Coyote, Doyle, Ertz, Noyes, many others. You may protest that these writers were able to sell science fiction to the high-pay markets because they were already well-known writers. It just ain't so, pal; on the contrary, they are well-known writers because they are skilled at their trade. When they have a science fiction story to write, they turn out a well-written story and it sells to a high-pay market. An editor of a successful magazine will bounce a poorly written story from a "name" writer just as quickly as one from an unknown. Perhaps he will write a long letter of explanation and suggestion, knowing as he does that writers are as touchy as white leghorns, but he will bounce it. At most, prominence of the author's name might decide a borderline case.

A short story stands a much better chance with the slicks if it is not more than five thousand words long. A human-interest story stands a better chance with the slicks than a gadget story does, because the human-interest story usually appeals to a wider audience than does a gadget story. But this does not rule out the gadget story. Consider "Note on Danger B" in a recent Saturday Evening Post and Wylie's "The Blunder," which appeared last year in Collier's.

Let us consider what a story is and how to write one. (Correction: how I write one-- remember Mr. Kipling's comment!)

A story is an account that is not necessarily true but that is interesting to read.

There are three main plots for the human-interest story: boy-meets-girl, the Little Tailor, and the man-who-learned-better. Credit the last category to L. Ron Huber; I had

thought for years that there were but two plots--he pointed out to me the third type.

Boy-meets-girl needs no definition. But don't disparage it. It reaches from the "Iliad" to John Taint's Time Stream. It's the greatest story of them all and has never been sufficiently exploited in science fiction. To be sure, it appears in most SF stories, but how often is it dragged in by the hair and how often is it the compelling and necessary element that creates and then solves the problem? It has great variety: boy-fails4o-meet-gift, boy-meets-girl-too-late, boy-meets-too-many-girls, boy-loses-girl, boy-and-girl-renounce-love-for-higher-purpose. Not science fiction? Here is a throw-away plot; you can have it free: elderly man meets very young girl; they discover that they are perfectly adapted to each other, perfectly in love, "soul mates." (Don't ask me how. It's up to you to make the thesis credible, If I'm going to have to write this story, 1 want to be paid for it.)

Now to make it a science fiction story. Time travel? Okay, what time theory--probable-times, classic theory, or what? Rejuvenation? Is this mating necessary to some greater end? Or vice versa? Or will you transcend the circumstances, as C. L. Moore did in that tragic masterpiece "Bright Illusion"?

I've used it twice as tragedy and shall probably use it again. Go ahead and use it yourself. I did not invent it; it is a great story that has been kicking around for centuries.

The little Tailor--this is an omnibus tot all stories about the little guy who becomes a big shot, or vice versa. The mg is from the fairy story. Examples: "Dick Whittington," all of the Alger books, Little Caesar, Galactic Patrol (but not Grey Lensrnan), Mein Kampf, David in the Old Testament. It is the success story or, in reverse, the story of tragic failure.

The man-who-learned-better; just what it sounds like - tbe story of a man who has one opinion, point of view, or evaluation at the beginning of the story, then acquires a new opinion or evaluation as a result of having his nose rubbed in some harsh facts. I had been writing this story for years before Hubbard pointed out to me the structure of it. Examples: my "Universe" and "Logic of Empire," Jack London's "South of the Slot," Dickens's, "A Christmas Carol."

The definition of a story as something interesting-but-not-necessarily-true is general enough to cover all writers, alt stories - even James Joyce, if you find his stuff interesting. (I don't!) For me, a story of the sort I want to write is still further limited to this recipe: a man finds himself in circumstances that create a problem for him. In coping with this problem, the man is changed in some fashion inside himself. The story is over when the inner change is complete--the external incidents may go on indefinitely.

People changing under stress:

A lonely rich man learns comradeship in a hobo jungle.
A milquetoast gets pushed too far and learns to fight.
A strong man is crippled and has to adjust to it.
A gossip learns to hold her tongue.
A hard-boiled materialist gets acquainted with a ghost.
A shrew is tamed.

This is the story of character, rather than incident. It's not everybody's dish, but for me it has more interest than the most overwhelming pure adventure story. It need not be unadventurous; the stress that produces the change in character can be wildly

adventurous, and often is.

But what has all this to do with science fiction? A great deal! Much so-called science fiction is not about human beings and their problems, consisting instead of a fictionalized framework, peopled by cardboard figures, on which is hung an essay about the Glorious Future of Technology. With due respect to Mr. Bellamy, Looking Backward is a perfect example of the fictionalized essay. I've done it myself; "Solution Unsatisfactory" is a fictionalized essay, written as such. Knowing that it would have to compete with real story, I used every device I could think of, some of them hardly admissible, to make it look like a story.

Another type of fiction alleged to be science fiction is the story laid in the future, or on another planet, or in another dimension, or such, which could just as well have happened on Fifth Avenue, in 1947. Change the costumes back to now, cut out the pseudoscientific double-talk and the blaster guns and it turns out to be a straight adventure story, suitable, with appropriate facelifting, to any other pulp magazine on the newsstand.

There is another type of honest-to-goodness science fiction story that is not usually regarded as science fiction: the story of people dealing with contemporary science or technology. We do not ordinarily mean this sort of story when we say "science fiction"; what we do mean is the speculative story, the story embodying the notion "just suppose--" or "What would happen if--." In the speculative science fiction story accepted science and established fiefs are extrapolated to produce a new situation, a new framework for human action. As a result Of this new situation, new human problems are created--and our store is about how human beings cope with those new problems.

The story is not about the new situation; it is about coping with problems arising out of the new situation.

Let's gather up the bits and define (he simon-pure science fiction story:

The conditions must be, in some respect, different from here and now, although the difference may lie only in an invention made in the course of the story.

The new conditions must be an essential part of the staff.

The problem itself--the "plot"--must be a human problem. The human problem must be one that is created by, or indispensably affected by, the new conditions.

And lastly, no established fact shall be violated, and, furthermore, when the story requires that a theory contrary to present accepted theory be used, the new theory should be rendered reasonably plausible and it must include and explain established facts as satisfactorily as the one the author saw fit to junk. It may be far-fetched, it may seem fantastic, but it must not be at variance with observed facts, i.e., if you are going to assume that the human race descended from Martians, then you've got to explain our apparent close relationship to terrestrial anthropoid apes as well. Pardon me if I go on about this. I love to read science fiction, but violation of that last requirement gets me riled. Rocketships should not make banked turns on empty space the way airplanes bank their turns on air. Lizards can't cross-breed with humans. The term "space warp" does not mean anything without elaborate explanation.

Not everybody talking about heaven, is going there--and there are a lot of people trying to write science fiction who haven't bothered to learn anything about science. Nor is there any excuse for them in these days of public libraries. You owe it to your readers (a) to bone up on the field of science you intend to introduce into your story; (b) unless

you yourself are well-versed in that field, you should also persuade some expert in that field to read your story and criticize it before you offer it to an unsuspecting public. Unless you are willing to take this much trouble, please, please stick to a contemporary background you are familiar with. Paderewski had to practice; Sonja Henie still works on her school figures; a doctor puts in many weary years before they will let him operate-- why should you be exempt from preparatory effort?

The simon-pure science fiction story--examples of human problems arising out of extrapolations of present science:

Biological warfare ruins the farm lands of the United States; how is Joe Doakes, a used-car dealer, to feed his family?

Interplanetary travel puts us in contact with a race able to read our thoughts; is the testimony of such beings admissible as evidence in a murder trial?

Men reach the Moon; what is the attitude of the Security Council of the United Nations? (Watch out for this one - and hold on to your hats!)

A complete technique for ectogenesis is developed; what is the effect on home, family, morals, religion? (Aldous Huxley left lots of this field unplowed--help yourself.)

And so on. I've limited myself to my notions about science fiction, but don't forget Mr. Kipling's comment. In any case it isn't necessary to know how--just go ahead and do it. Write what you like to read. If you have a yen for it, if you get a kick out of "just imagine--," if you love to think up new worlds, then come on in, the water's fine and there is plenty of room.

But don't write to me to point out how I have violated my own rules in this story or that; I've violated all of them and I would much rather try a new story than defend an old one.

I'm told that these articles are supposed to be some use to the reader. I have a guilty feeling that all of the above may have been more for my amusement than for your edification. Therefore I shall chuck in as a bonus a group of practical, tested rules which, if followed meticulously, will prove rewarding to any writer.

I shall assume that you can type, that you know the accepted commercial format or can be trusted to look it up and follow it, and that you always use new ribbons and clean type. Also, that you can spell and punctuate and can use grammar well enough to get by. These things are merely the word-carpenter's sharp tools. He must add to them these business habits:

1. You must write.
2. You must finish what you start.
3. You must refrain from rewriting except to editorial order.
4. You must put it on the market.
5. You must keep it on the market until sold.

The above five rules really have more to do with how to write speculative fiction than anything said above them. But they are amazingly hard to follow--which is why there are so few professional writers and so many aspirants, and which is why I am not afraid to give away the racket! But, if you will follow them, it matters not how you write, you will find some editor somewhere, sometime, so unwary or so desperate for copy as to buy the worst old dog you, or I, or anybody else, can throw at him.

End.

This essay taken from the book: Writing Science Fiction and Fantasy (Twenty dynamic essays by today's top professionals).