Uncle Orson's Writing Class

Captured from Hatrack River

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Lesson #1

On Rhetoric and Style

Question 1:

It seems that there are people who "are writers," and there are people who "are not." When the "writer" writes something -- let it be a book, an interview, or a letter to his legendary author -- the reader can usually detect "Yep, he is a writer." You have referred to that as rhetorical ability. Is this ability learnable? If it is learnable, it is bound to be something you can improve, and I'd like to improve mine very much.

-- Submitted by Yaniv Aknin

OSC Replies:

I remember in my first conversation with a fellow grad student when I was (briefly) in the writing program at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, this earnest young man said, "The first thing you have to do is develop a style. Until you have that, it doesn't matter what your story's about." This idea I found so appallingly ignorant that I wrote him off as a writer -- only to find that he was one of the most highly regarded of the students in the workshop, and that his idea was widely held among literary writers.

"Style" cannot be taught, or even learned, not directly. Well, let me qualify that: A good, distinctive style that is a pleasure to read cannot be taught or learned directly. However, a stilted, awkward, affected, intrusive, and annoyingly artificial style can be taught and learned, and I daresay that such style is the primary achievement of most creative writing programs in American universities. I wish I had a dollar for every writing class that has begun with the statement from the teacher, "I don't know much about plot, so in this course we're going to concentrate on style."

What is style? It's often thought of as a combination of several things, including:

- word choice
- phrasing
- rhythm
- point of view
- level of penetration
- attitude

The last three -- viewpoint, level of penetration, and attitude -- will vary from story to story. Furthermore, if the level of penetration is deep or if the story is told in first person, the word choice, phrasing, and rhythm should also depend on the character. But these aspects of "style" that vary with the particular story or character are more correctly referred to as "voice," and this is at least partly the result of conscious development by the author. I can't get very far in writing any story until I'm comfortable with the narrative voice, even if I don't understand it. For instance, in Hart's Hope I found myself directly addressing the reader -- a very old-fashioned style -- until, about two-thirds of the way through the novel,

I realized that this wasn't just the "dear reader" rhetoric of pre-modern novelists; the whole book was being written by one of the characters in order to persuade another of the characters to make a particular choice at the end of the story. I didn't have to change anything I had written before when I realized whose voice the story was written in. Without understanding why, I had been writing in that character's voice all along.

But this is hardly what anyone would call my "style." An author's style is usually conceived as something that can be found in all his works, certain quirks or mannerisms that constantly show up no matter what voice has been developed for a particular story. Scholars have done computer analysis of word frequency, for instance, and found that authors have quite distinctive and individual "fingerprints" of vocabulary that show up in all large-enough samples of their work.

Certainly I have such quirks. For instance, I have a pronounced tendency to begin sentences and paragraphs with conjunctions. I didn't realize this, however, until it was pointed out to me by an editor, Andrew Offut, who regarded it as an annoying error. Indeed, it was annoying when done to excess -- and to excess was definitely how I did it! Thus I have a tendency, whenever I notice myself doing it, to recast sentences so they stand alone rather than being linked by conjunctions to the sentence before. The result is, not the elimination of the "conjunctivitis," but a slight toning-down, so it's less annoying. Without thinking about it, without meaning to, I still continue to do it. Why?

Again, it took someone else to point out a plausible reason. Michael Collings, a poet and scholar who has written about my work, pointed out that the Book of Mormon, whose English translation is written in a style deliberately reminiscent of the King James version of the Bible, is extravagant in its use of precisely the same rhetorical device. This book, which I first read as a child and have re-read dozens of times since (and on which I have based many plays and novels), has inserted itself into my style, most especially when I'm recounting a story that feels important to me. That is, I unconsciously become "scriptural" when recounting pivotal events.

Having tracked down a possible explanation of one aspect of my "style," let me point out the obvious: At no point in the development of this trait in my writing was I conscious of it, except to try to remove it or lessen its effects. It showed up in my writing because it is part of my innate use of language, arising from my early reading and my private hierarchy of levels of language formality and informality, intensity and casualness. I could not have planned such a stylistic quirk, and if I had, it would have been artificial and annoying -- or, shall I say, <u>even more</u> annoying.

Every writer -- no, every human being -- has a distinctive voice, which emerges when we speak and, with luck, when we write. In certain kinds of writing -- process writing, for instance, and legal writing, and highly formal discourse -- such quirkiness needs to be held under control, or even completely submerged. That is the only value of such guides as <u>Elements of Style</u>, which is often touted as a writer's guide to "good style," but which in fact is utterly useless to writers of fiction; no, worse than useless, because it tears the soul out of phrase, sentence, and paragraph, leaving only a lifeless skeleton behind.

Fiction writing is the opposite of these. The living voice of the individual author needs to be heard; the reader is hungry for it, and delights in the music of it. However, a contradictory force is also at work: The reader wants to be guided through the story so as to be able to follow what happens and why without confusion or uncertainty. The author's rhetoric, therefore, must be employed in such a way as to achieve the latter purpose -- clarity -- without killing the individuality of his style.

Unfortunately, what happens in many, perhaps most, creative writing courses is that the students are

encouraged -- or encourage each other -- to exaggerate or artificially simulate the individual voice quite at the expense of clarity, so that the reader is left perplexed, confused, unguided through the mapless landscape of the fictional universe. All that the reader is given is a voice, but one without content, as if someone were singing in your ear in a language you didn't understand. Very pretty, but after a while you start longing for some content.

Or maybe it's not so pretty. Because the "style" that intrudes is rarely the natural voice of a living person. Usually it's an affected, artificial style, chosen in imitation of other writers or invented in order to call attention to the writer at the expense of the story. Thus fiction, instead of being a storytelling medium, is transformed into a karaoke bar, where the entertainment consists of songs we've heard a thousand times, presented solely in order for singers to show off their imitations of other people's voices.

Is there nothing you can do, then, to enhance your own style, to improve it? Why, of course there is! But, paradoxically, you don't do it by working on your style.

In writing classes that I've taught over the years, I often get students who are victims of bad writing classes, whose "style" bears all the earmarks of too much effort to be "stylish." The result is invariably impenetrable prose; sentences that don't flow into paragraphs; awkward, confusing storytelling so you can barely tell what's happening or why. The temptation for the writing teacher is to say, "Your style is horrible! I can't make sense of this paragraph! Go back and do it over and make it read more smoothly!"

This, of course, is the worst thing you could say to such a writer. For the problem is that the writer is already thinking too much about the language he's writing. We've all had the experience of doing a physical process that is familiar to us -- riding a bike or throwing a ball -- and then, suddenly, we begin to analyze what we're doing, and in that moment we start doing it noticeably worse. The intrusion of our conscious mind into the process makes us clumsy. We have to slow down; our reflexes were doing a much better job, more quickly.

So instead of telling these stylistically crippled students to concentrate more on their manner of writing, I force them to stop thinking about writing at all. In a trick I learned from Algis Budrys, I make them write, not stories, but notes about stories on three-by-five cards. "Don't write scenes, don't write the story," I tell them. "Just jot down what happens and why, as simply and clearly as possible. No dialogue! No description! Just what happens and why." Sometimes I have to repeat the assignment, especially the mantra "what happens and why," many times before the student finally stops trying to "write well" and instead merely writes it down.

Here's what happens: These problem writers, without exception, write better, clearer, and more stylistically interesting prose when they are not trying to write well. When their focus is on the story, and on helping the reader understand the plain tale, plainly told, their style improves dramatically and becomes far more interesting and individual than it ever was when they were trying to follow some teacher's or writer's instruction or (shudder!) example.

(So radical is the improvement that even spelling improves -- for as often as not, serious spelling problems arise when students are thinking about spelling as they write. Think about it: Anyone who reads regularly has all the correct spellings stored somewhere in memory, and those correct spellings are more likely to emerge when you're not thinking about spelling than when you are. However, you're more likely to make homophone mistakes when you're not thinking about it -- their for there is one of my common ones -- so you still need to copy edit.)

Your natural style is already present in the language you use when you speak freely and fearlessly. That is the "style" you want to have show up in your work. Let other people figure out what it is -- you aren't even thinking about it.

What you are thinking about is clarity -- communicating clearly with the audience. But that communication must also include persuasion -- you must persuade the reader to believe in your fictional characters and the world they move through, and also to care about what happens to people who, after all, don't even exist. The choice of language to achieve these ends is rhetoric, not style, and there is much to be learned about rhetoric. There are strategies and tactics, devices that work in some circumstances and not in others. If you must think about language, think about how better to achieve the goal of communicating clearly and persuasively with your readers.

This is the opposite, in some ways, of trying to create a "style." Instead of concentrating on yourself -- how can I make people notice what a wonderfully stylish writer I am? -- you are concentrating on the reader -- how can I most effectively get the events of this story into the reader's living memory? The more you write (and the more other people read and respond to your writing, revealing to you the places where they become confused, bored, or skeptical while reading your tales), the better you'll get at controlling the rhetoric of your fiction. (And do yourself a favor -- read Wayne C. Booth's The Rhetoric of Fiction.)

Isaac Asimov, as a young writer, found himself imitating the admired style of his youth -- a purple kind of prose that today would be execrable, but even then was no great thrill to read. Disgusted with the results in his own storytelling, he stopped trying to have a "style" at all, and instead concentrated on simple, declarative writing. In his own mind, he was removing all style from his work. But I see it differently. Asimov was concentrating on perfecting his rhetoric, which he did better than any other writer of our time. His writing became so transparent, so rhetorically effective, that you are almost never conscious of the style, but rather are conscious of the ideas or events being presented. Asimov was criticized for not "characterizing" (though characterization is utterly unrelated to style), but what I find is that, on those rare occasions when the kind of story he was telling required deep character creation, he did an excellent job of it; however, the reader was never aware of it because the forward flow didn't stop in order to allow obvious, self-conscious character revelation.

In fact, Asimov became the foremost practitioner of the American plain style. Because he wrote science fiction, the chief gossips of the American literary neighborhood never gave him credit for his achievement, and in fact wrote disparagingly of his writing when they noticed it at all. But not one of them is capable of what Asimov achieved. And -- most important to this discussion -- his work had a definite, pronounced style which is extraordinarily hard to imitate. His "fingerprint" is clear and uniquely his own. That it does not intrude on the reader's consciousness at any point during the process of reading is one of its virtues, not a failing.

Can you improve your style? Not directly. But if you work on your rhetoric -- on communicating the plain tale clearly, credibly, persuasively -- your natural style will emerge without any effort at all on your part. Other people will point it out; sometimes, when it is excessive, you will even want to tone it down (after the fact, though, never while you're writing your first draft). But you yourself will never give it a thought while writing.

Wait a minute -- there is just one little thing that can improve your style, if you're up to it, if it matters to you. I'm a great believer in the music of language, the rhythm, the meter of it. Now and then, while writing, I become aware of writing with close attention to rhythm -- usually a fluid iambic. This is

usually second nature to me, because I spent so many hours and pages writing poetry and verse drama when I was younger. And in denouements, especially of my short stories, I sometimes write it as smoothly flowing verse, pure and simple, and then spread it out as regular prose on the page. Note the ending of my short story "The Fringe," for instance. But you'll notice that in so doing, I am not trying to make my writing "distinctive" or "stylish." Rather I am using iambic rhythm as a closure device -- a rhetorical tactic -- much the way that Shakespeare often closed scenes with rhymed couplets. A more formalized, structured language gives a sense of closure. Since this can be called "style," it's only fair to point out that I use it, and it is a deliberate, conscious language technique. But I must also point out that this is completely consistent with what I have said above: If I do it right, it is invisible to the reader, and it falls within the category of rhetoric -- achieving practical effectiveness of writing -- rather than style -- causing readers to notice how "well" I'm writing.

-- 12 May 1998

Question 2

Lesson #1

On Rhetoric and Style

Question 2:

Why was I so disappointed with **Treasure Box** as opposed to how much I enjoyed **Pastwatch**? (I was given both at the same time, so they are easiest for me to compare.) When I read **Treasure Box**, the beginning (character creation) was far better than what I have ever seen you -- or anyone else -- do in two chapters. As the end approached, I had to force myself to read the rest. It was as if your "rhetorical ability" was slowly thrown out the window with every page starting at Quentin's encounter with Madeleine. **Pastwatch**, though not the book I like the most, was terrific all the way through -- not a single boring page, not even on first reading.

-- Submitted by Yaniv Aknin

OSC Replies:

The easy answer -- and an accurate one, as far as it goes -- is that not every story is for every reader. In fact, the experience you describe tells me little more than that you simply didn't care for the story I told in Treasure Box, right from the start. If you were noticing the style in those first two chapters, then I had already failed to engage you enough to keep you concentrating on what happens and why; thus it is no surprise that you were not emotionally involved toward the end.

I can speculate endlessly about why. Treasure Box, for instance, deliberately breaks one of the cardinal rules of fantastic storytelling: We have, not just the witchcraft motif, but also a life-after-death, haunted-by-your-sister motif. That's one fantasy element too many in a contemporary "realistic" story; most of the time, a story can bear only one such element. (Lost Boys had two elements, but one was of natural, real-world horror -- the child-killer -- so that only the ghost motif was a contradiction of reality as we experience it. Even so, those two elements were quite overpowering and some readers were lost in that book, as well.) Homebody risks the same perilous flaw -- the house as monster and a ghost -- but I tried to weave them far more closely together than I was able to do in Treasure Box, so they feel more like part of the same story.

Every story presents its own problems and challenges, and the writer, after doing his best to solve or compensate for them, will invariably fail to make the story work for at least some of the readers who normally like his work. There's a reason why some of my books are less popular than others, and it isn't necessarily because some are less well-written than others. Songmaster, for example, is an early work of mine (my third novel), and shows a distressing lack of understanding of structure; yet it is one of my more popular novels, after all these years, because its natural core audience is so emotionally involved in the story that they forgive the flaws. Hart's Hope, however, which is one of my best-written works and still a favorite, is my least-read novel -- in part, I think, because of a long opening that does not emotionally engage the reader, and in part because the events of the story are so unpleasant that upon finishing the book, readers are rarely tempted to thrust it on their friends, saying, "Here, you've got to read this!"

Therefore, the easy answer (but I managed to make it take three long paragraphs, after all, didn't I?) to your question is: Not every story is going to please every reader. Sorry you didn't like Treasure Box.

But this is a writing class, not a Q&A session with readers. And there is also a rhetorical reason why you might have detected a distinct change between the opening (development) portion of Treasure Box and the later (climax) section. My rhetoric changes drastically between those two sections. My development sections -- which often extend two-thirds or three-fourths of the way through the novel, when the milieu and web of character relationships are complex (as in Pastwatch and Enchantment) -- are rhetorically "thick." I am working hard to create the full world in the reader's mind, especially the characters' attitudes, relationships, expectations, and motives. Often I give too much of the point-of-view character's thoughts in the effort to make sure that the story is utterly clear to the reader (though of course I cut back excessive passages that I notice prior to publication).

Once the situation is clear, the elements all laid out before the reader, then I change rhetorical strategies. I am no longer trying to persuade. Either you believe in and care about the characters, or you don't. From this point till the end of the book, I rarely have need of deep penetration into the characters' attitudes, precisely because you already know what the character thinks about this sort of thing. Almost everything can be revealed through action and dialogue, trusting the reader's memory to put it all in context. So those passages of introspection, memory, attitude, analysis are almost entirely missing from the latter portions of my books. They become almost pure action, even though I hope that I have created a lush enough context that the reader will feel the moral and emotional weight of the events without my having to give more than superficial reminders of the issues at stake.

Pastwatch, being extraordinarily complex, keeps introducing new milieux, characters, and moral dilemmas almost to the very end of the book. The "unfolding" is, however, extraordinarily rapid because so much groundwork has been laid. Treasure Box is in many ways quite simple. The pure-action section is much longer. I have since wondered if perhaps I should have done more from the point of view of the young witch, giving more moral weight to the ending; certainly in Enchantment I made sure that we got Baba Yaga's point of view throughout, which makes it work more effectively, I think, than Treasure Box.

But the flaw is a small one. If you had been engaged in the story, then you would have noticed neither the thickness of the development phase (which, contrary to your impression, is not better or richer than usual) nor the thinness of the climax phase. All you would have cared about was what happens and why. So your particular response to Treasure Box may still be more the result of the fact that you simply aren't in the natural audience for that story, though it may also be because of a real rhetorical structure that stretches across most of my stories.

Do I intend to "correct" that "problem"? No. Because I don't think it's a problem, I think it's a virtue. If you read fiction in order to enjoy a distinctive style consistently maintained throughout a novel, you shouldn't be reading my fiction anyway. That's not what I create it for. What I do is create stories and tell them as well as possible. If, for you, the story is the thing, then I might have something for you, both as a writer of fiction and as a writing teacher here in Uncle Orson's Writing Class.

-- 12 May 1998

Lesson #2

Does a Writing Career Always Mean Novels?

Question:

Everyone tells me I am "a natural" at writing, and everyone who's ever read my stories loves them. I also enjoy writing, and I am looking into it as a full-time career. However, the one problem I face is the fact that I have a very short attention span and rarely have the patience to complete anything longer than a short story. Is it possible to make a career in today's writing world without cranking out novels? If not, then is it possible for me to develop enough patience to make my stories more in depth and worthwhile?

-- Submitted by Morgan Majors

OSC Replies:

A fulltime writing career -- I certainly never dared to imagine it would ever happen to me, not until I actually started selling stories. And then the thought crept in ... what if I didn't have to go to work? What if I could do this all the time? So believe me, I understand the temptation.

Still, I must warn you that writing, which is a pleasure to you now in such stolen moments as you can devote to it, becomes drudgery when it's the way you earn your daily bread. Yes, there are still good moments when you solve a particularly nasty problem in a story, or when you complete a story that you know absolutely works. But every day when you get up, writing is your duty, and that changes everything. It becomes lonely, frustrating, and it's hard to want to do it. And even when the money comes, it comes in fits and starts. You never know where the next dollar is coming from.

Independent Means. So if you're thinking of a career in writing, there are several things to think of before deciding whether you can do it with one particular form of writing or another. The first question, however, trumps all the others: Do you have another source of income? That makes everything much easier -- a spouse with a steady income stream; a nice inheritance large enough you can live off the interest; indulgent parents or other relatives willing to fund years of writing with no guarantee of return on investment -- any of these will do. If you don't have to worry about money, then you can write whatever you want -- even short stories! Even poetry!

Pleasing the Audience. Not that it's easy, even with financial security -- you still have to worry about whether an editor will publish your work, and which work will get published first or most frequently. If you're a normal person (and most writers are, despite our efforts to appear strange or "special"), you'll have a tendency to keep doing the thing that people most appreciate. Your personal preference, in other words, changes to fit what the market demands. Only when you've had at least a moderate amount of success and achievement in one genre or form will you begin to be tempted to branch out in spite of the preferences of the public or the publishers.

My experience is that writers who claim they write only what pleases them are fooling themselves. So don't be deceived into thinking that writers who have chosen to do work that makes money have "sold out." They have done what all writers do, at least at first -- they have tended to repeat that which most pleases others. Even with no money or little money at stake, that is what happens in every genre, including "literary" writers, who are often more deeply bound to the expectations of their audience than

writers whose work brings in a noticeable income. What frees you from this is confidence and maturity, not your choice of form or genre.

So don't imagine that by sticking with nonlucrative short stories you are more "pure" in your art than those who choose to write novels because in that form they have a better chance of gaining the financial independence to support their writing habit. As soon as you seek any audience at all for your work, you are entering into a transaction, with give and take needed on both sides. You will compromise your work, of course -- as any act of communication requires negotiation on both sides to achieve intelligibility. That particular "compromise" -- trying to communicate with actual readers -- is, in fact, what makes your work better. So if you decide to reach out to the audience in order to enable yourself to tell more stories to wider and deeper effect, that is not "selling out" -- it's diving in!

Fatal Compromise. This is not to say that there aren't ways to fatally compromise your work. If you betray what feels right to you in a story in order to insert something that you have been told is more "commercial," then you are dead as a writer. But that sort of compromise is never necessary, in large part because all those things you've been told about what makes a work "commercial" is hogwash. What makes a work commercial is a writer who believes in, cares about, and clearly communicates the kind of story that a substantial audience wants to pay for and for which a publishing outlet exists. If you don't believe in or care about the story you're writing, you will not be "commercial" in the long run, even if your work looks like Krantz's or Grisham's. Your audience will never get passionate about your work because you aren't passionate about it.

But this kind of compromise has nothing to do with decisions about form and genre. If you are a storyteller, you can write stories of any length and any form, in any genre -- or outside of or between genres. But some forms and lengths will be more comfortable to you than others, and some genres will be more interesting to you than others. I believe that writers only improve their work in their favorite forms, lengths, and genres when they experiment with other forms, lengths, and genres. If nothing else, your early failures in an unfamiliar form or genre will give you more respect for the writers who excel in them. But my fiction was improved by my experience as a playwright -- and I find now that my playwriting is greatly improved by my experience as a ficcionero. My switch from short stories to novels was hard, but the result was that my short stories are also better because of my greater understanding of the difference between the lengths. My fiction has improved my poetry; my verse dramas improved my command of prose in my fiction; and so on, and so on.

Best of all, by experimenting with different forms, lengths, and genres, you become more flexible. Some of your comfortable forms, lengths, and genres are going to be more lucrative than others. So if you first set yourself to mastering those that will enable you to have the financial independence to pursue the others as well, you are only improving yourself as an artist -- not "selling out." My science fiction sells better than my fantasy or my contemporary fiction, but that does not make it inferior. I put my whole heart into everything I write (yes, even this informal essay), and I write only the stories I believe in and care about. But that doesn't stop me from making sure that in every year I complete several works that are more likely to make money, in order to earn the time I spend on those works that aren't so likely to pay the bills. That was the attitude of such commercial -- but crusading -- writers as Mark Twain, Charles Dickens, and Henry James. Writers who are desperate for money are not free; writers with a satisfactory income (an amount defined by each individual, of course) are the ones who have the freedom to try to change the world -- either the world at large or the smaller world of art.

Short Story Markets. Which brings us, at last, to your actual question: Can you make a career out of writing short stories?

You haven't mentioned what kind of short fiction you write. If you write mainstream stories, then there is definitely a wide-open marketplace. Unfortunately, very few of the venues pay anything but copies. To make a living, you'd have to sell -- regularly -- to Atlantic, Harper's, or The New Yorker, and then publish books of short stories -- and even then, the reality of the marketplace is that short story collections just don't sell. So there are a few markets that still pay very well and offer prestige, too -- but John Updike's and Ann Tyler's stories are in the same mix as yours. Good luck!

The picture is just as bleak in other genres. Women's fiction? Sure, there's a market -- but thousands of writers are competing for each precious slot in the big slick women's magazines. Hard to break in, hard to keep selling regularly. Mysteries, science fiction, and fantasy have lively markets, but when it comes to money, there just isn't that much. How many stories do you think you could sell, at $300 a story, each year? No, even in the liveliest of the short fiction markets, a livable income is unlikely, to say the least.

There are a couple of notable exceptions. One thinks of Harlan Ellison and Ray Bradbury, in the science fiction genre. I don't know about either man's finances as his reputation was building. But $300 for a story went a lot farther in 1955 or 1965 than it does now; and both writers were fortunate enough to earn a reputation and a following that enabled their story collections to sell far above the norm. Bradbury has also become a staple of the education market, which guarantees him an annuity, and both writers are in that pantheon of authors whose books of stories are eagerly passed on from parent to child, from friend to friend. You can't plan on that happening, and even if it does, it won't happen soon enough to help you during those early years when you're building your oeuvre.

Swallowing the Whale. But what do you have against novels? Is it the length that intimidates you? It shouldn't. Novels may be ten times the pages (or more), but they are not ten times the storyline. I find that it takes as much energy to create a good short story as to create a good novel -- the development time is the same. Only the typing time differs -- and not by that much.

Let's say you have six months of writing ahead of you. Twenty-six weeks, 182 days. Let's say that when you're really moving on a story, you can write five pages a day; when you're just starting out, though, you write only two usable pages a day. Most writers I know are like me in that they can't finish a story and immediately plunge in and write at full speed on the next. You need time to shift gears, to change from one imaginary world to another. And I'm not speaking just of science fiction, fantasy, or historical fiction, in which you literally change worlds. Even in realistic contemporary fiction, you have to move into the world that your characters inhabit -- their relationships, their locale, their work, their concerns.

So let's be fantastically optimistic, and say that it takes you only a week to let go of one story and get started on the next. And let's say that your stories are an average of 3,000 words in length (a bit long for li-fi, quite short for sci-fi). Using a "page" of 250 words, a novel of 100,000 words is 400 pages and a story of 3,000 words is twelve pages.

In writing the novel, you struggle with the new voices and milieux for the first fifty pages. That's twenty-five days at two good pages a day. But after that, you're really in your stride, and you can average five good pages a day. So the remaining 350 pages take you seventy days. Allowing yourself some days off, so you can have a life, you've got a novel finished in about a hundred days.

Now let's look at the short stories you could write in that time. It looks like such a short time to write a twelve-pager, doesn't it? But the first half of the story comes at the rate of two pages a day, on average, so it takes you a whole week to finish a story. Then you need a week to change gears, to find (or create) a

handle on the idea that will be your next story. So you average a story every two weeks. That's seven stories in the amount of time it would take you to write a novel. Admittedly, that's a lot of stories -- but we're assuming you're a fulltime writer and you are determined to do this as a career.

The financial comparison, of course, is an eye-opener. If you sell all seven of those short stories to the sci-fi magazines at about three hundred dollars each, you'd have $2100. If the novel is your first novel, of course, you are unlikely to get much more than $3,000 as an advance, and royalties are a long way off. So your first novel won't get you that much more than the stories you'd write in the same amount of time.

But if your first novel sells decently, you're likely to get to the $10,000 level fairly quickly, or even $15,000. The stories, however, are still paying you at the same rate. So if this six-month period is in your third year of selling, you actually have half a year's income when you finish the novel.

That's money, though. What about creativity? Here's the thing. If the novel you wrote in a hundred days earns you half a year's income, you don't have to start the next novel right away. We were talking about six months, remember? Half a year! So you still have eighty days left -- eighty days in which you can write a couple of short stories, a few poems, maybe even a draft of a screenplay (which is much shorter than a novel). You have eighty days of freedom before you start the next serious money-earning project.

All these numbers are imaginary, of course. You'll find your own pace of working. Mine is actually much faster during the writing phase -- but the breaks between projects are longer. That's why you don't see ten short stories a year from me. When novels and stories each take a month of downtime before you can get started, the freedom to write short work is sharply curtailed! But no matter how you crunch the numbers, the fact that the novel has a single creative arc makes for an efficiency of writing that makes up for much of its great length. You don't have to go through that beginning phase over and over again. So during those hundred days, you ended up with 21,000 words of short story during the time that it would have taken you to write 100,000 words of novel.

Can you make a career writing only short stories? Sure, if you're financially secure. Otherwise, the numbers just don't work. But do you have to give up writing short stories in order to write novels? Of course not. Novels just aren't that much harder than short stories -- once you learn how to write for that length.

And for that, I'm writing a book, based in large part on the experience my students and I had in our novel-writing workshop in the winter of '98 at Pepperdine University. It takes a radical change of storytelling pace and a different proportion of dramatic versus narrative writing (showing versus telling), and that has to be learned. (It also takes a firm grasp of the key structural decisions -- but I've already written two books that deal with that.)

For now, though, the conclusion is inescapable. If you want to write fiction, and you want to do it as a career, and you don't have financial support aside from the payment you receive for writing the fiction, then you must learn to write novels. But the good news is that novel writing isn't that hard, compared to short story writing. You write at the same daily pace that you use for short story writing, and you find yourself with a novel in a surprisingly short time. So why not learn to write novels in order to support your short story habit?

-- 16 July 1998

Lesson #3

Discussion of Dialogue and Style

Question 1:

My question is on dialog in a story. Is it good to have a lot of dialog or is it not good? Also, whenever I write a story and I use dialog it always seems that I use the phrase "(name) said." I try to vary that when I write, but it still always seems to be to repetitive.

-- Submitted by Anonymous

OSC Replies:

When Do You Use Dialogue?

The decision isn't really between dialogue and not-dialogue, or how much dialogue to have. The decision you're really making is between presenting a scene in full or using narrative to summarize action, set a scene, explore attitude, explain something, or any of the other writing that lifts you out of the scene itself. It's fair to say that most things that happen in the lives of your characters are not presented in scenes -- because they either aren't important enough or interesting enough to warrant that level of presentation. In fact, most of the things your characters do aren't mentioned at any level. How often do you bother to tell when your characters scratch themselves, blow their noses, use the bathroom, stretch, tap their fingers, read road signs they pass while driving, or remember that teacher in third grade who ... well, you get the idea. Only a few events or details are telling enough to be included in your story at all, and far fewer are worth devoting the enormous amount of space consumed by detailed scenes.

Presenting a scene in full doesn't always involve dialogue, either -- for instance, if you're writing a scene in which someone is preparing an elaborate practical joke, you may show every step he takes and his thoughts along the way, without having a single word spoken aloud. And sometimes you'll drop a line of dialogue in the midst of events that are being summarized. But most of the time, scenes will include more than one character and will require dialogue, and non-scenes won't need much dialogue, or none at all.

By now you can see where I'm going with this. You don't "include dialogue" because dialogue is "good" or "not good." You write scenes because those are the most entertaining or important events, and you use dialogue because what matters is what the people say to each other. If you included meaningless dialogue -- for instance, conversation with a store clerk as your character buys gum, when that conversation leads exactly nowhere and the gum is never even chewed -- then it only makes your readers impatient for you to get on with the story (i.e., the things that are causally connected with the dilemmas they care about). And if you summarize or skip scenes that the readers want to see, you end up losing them because you aren't satisfying their desire to see these people in action with each other.

What about "Said"?

What we're really talking about is "tagging" dialogue -- letting us know who says the words within the quotation marks. The tagword said is invisible to the reader. Just as readers don't take particular note of the common marks of punctuation, except to mentally (or orally) read the pauses and the melodic line of

the sentences, they don't notice the repetition of said (with one exception). Think about it -- do you ever find yourself thinking, "He sure uses the word the too much." Of course you don't -- because the is invisible, attaching itself to the noun it makes definite. Likewise, said attaches to a name or pronoun, identifying that person as the speaker of the sentence in quotation marks.

The only time said becomes visible is when you overload it or replace it too much. You should only replace said or include adverbs modifying said when the dialogue itself does not contain enough information to let the reader know how the words were spoken. For instance:

"Get your filthy hands off me," she said.

With that statement, I certainly don't need to say, "she said angrily" or even "she shouted," though of course I can use those tags. But I would need an adverb if I wanted an eccentric reading:

"Get your filthy hands off me," she whispered as she licked his cheek.

In that case, because it is not redundant information, the word said must be replaced by another tag verb and a modifier ("as she licked his cheek") or the reader won't understand that "she" is making a seductive joke. But even then, you can avoid loading the tag by simply putting most of the information in another sentence:

She took his wrists and pulled them behind her, so she was folded in his arms. "Get your filthy hands off me," she said.

Unfortunately, an astonishing number of elementary and secondary school teachers, utterly ignorant of good style, instruct their poor students to avoid overusing said. As a result, these poor students think that it's good -- even necessary -- to indulge in "said-book-ism," where the word said is always either replaced or accompanied by an adverb. Nothing is ever simply tagged; it's always replied, whispered, shouted, uttered, remarked, commented, intoned, murmured, wondered, laughed, hissed, muttered; or said bleakly, happily, merrily, snidely, nastily, angrily, loudly, softly, in astonishment, under his breath, with a smile, or ... well, you get the idea. Quite apart from the hilarity that arises from inadvertent Tom Swifties -- "I'm afraid we'll have to amputate," said the surgeon disarmingly -- it is this variety that becomes repetitive and annoying. That's because the reader is constantly being distracted from the dialogue and forced to examine meaningless, uninteresting tags.

Most of the time, all you need is said, because it, plus the name or pronoun, contains all the information that's needed to tag a line of dialogue. The repetition of said is only annoying when you have a long stretch of short speeches with only two speakers active in the scene. And then the solution is not to replace said with other tagwords, but to omit tags entirely for several lines of dialogue at a time. The danger in omitting tags, however, is that the author can sometimes lose track of whose turn it is, and the dialogue doesn't come out even -- you end up with the same person speaking twice in a row, without a tag, and the poor reader gets lost trying to figure out who is saying what.

Tagging is mostly a mechanical task. When you go back through your manuscript to edit, you'll pick up on a few places where you have too many tags, or overloaded tags, and a few others where you need to insert more information at the tag. My advice, though, is not to think about it at all during the writing process. Just use said routinely, except when you must -- and I mean must -- include more information than a mere tag.

However, I must in all fairness point out that in the genre of women's romance novels, "said-book-ism" is the convention, not an error. Both the readers and writers of romance novels seem to have believed those misguided schoolteachers, and the result is whole novels in which said is never used alone. This is one of the reasons I can't read romances -- I go too insane with the said-book-ism to get through more than a few pages at a time. But if that's the genre you want to write, then you have to respect the conventions of your audience. Beware, though, if you ever want to escape that genre -- because you can't carry those said-book-isms with you, and that's a habit that's hard to break!

-- 14 August 1998

Question 2

Lesson #3

Discussion of Dialogue and Style

Question 2:

I have trouble keeping the voice of my characters consistent throughout my story. Do you have any tips concerning dialogue? Specifically, keeping all my characters from sounding the same.

-- Submitted by Anonymous

OSC Replies:

Differentiating Characters

The fact is, you can never keep characters from sounding somewhat the same, because you can't escape from your own authorship. You have innate music in your writing, your sense of how language ought to flow, and you can no more escape that than you can change your skin.

But you don't have to try. That's because if you're using dialogue properly, it will show up in scenes that matter or that entertain. In such scenes, each character will have his or her own agenda, attitude, and experiences to draw on. The content of the speeches will differentiate them enough that you can often dispense with tags. For instance, the line of dialogue, "So she was lonely! You didn't have to sleep with her, did you?" does not need to be tagged for us to know, in a two-person scene, that it is said by the person who did not sleep with the woman in question.

Notice that that line of dialogue conveys, not just content, but agenda and attitude as well. The person who says it is trying to make the other person feel bad (or worse) about what he did; but the speaker also is saying it with some degree of exasperated humor. An attitude change might result in: "Most people are lonely. Are you planning to sleep with all of them?" More sarcastic, yes? Or another attitude: "Do you think that her loneliness excuses what you did?" No humor there!

Or we can change agenda. "Everybody's lonely, and you slept with her. So what?" Now the speaker is not trying to get the other person to feel bad. "She was lonely, she needed you, you helped her. Where's the harm?" Now the speaker's agenda is to make the other person feel better. "She tells everybody she's lonely. She slept with you because she's too cheap to buy a TV." Now the agenda is to ridicule the other person.

You get the idea, by now, I'm sure. It is the character's attitude, purpose, experience, and relationship with the other character or characters in the scene that will make it impossible for his or her dialogue to have been spoken by anyone else. That is all the differentiation that is needed, most of the time.

The only time you run into differentiation problems in necessary scenes is when you give all your characters the same attitude. For instance, if everybody is sarcastic, then it gets harder to differentiate. But that's a characterization problem, not a dialogue problem.

False Differentiation

Beware of false differentiation, though. Some writers try such clumsy techniques as trying to write dialect or drunkenness or annoying personal habits into the dialogue. "Whatcha gonna do, boss?" is a cheap and stupid way of representing the speech of "low class" people -- primarily because, at least in America, even highly educated people speak with contraction and elision without being aware of doing so. When spoken rapidly, the sentence "I don't know" becomes "I don' know" or "I d'know" -- in other words, "I dunno." But snobbish writers only attempt to write this way for low, uneducated characters. How bogus!

Aside from my political objections, however, the real reason writing class, dialect, or drunkenness doesn't work is because it interferes with reading. Try picking up any piece by Artemus Ward, for instance (a contemporary of Mark Twain). The dialect is so thick that the dialogue is unreadable. You have to sound the words out phonetically in order to decipher what is being said. This slows down the reading and throws the reader's concentration away from the content of the story and onto the process.

It is better to represent dialect, drunkenness, or class through word choice and syntax. "I am thinking you are not sure what to do next" conveys foreignness quite adequately, especially if the narrator has already told you the speaker has an Urdu accent -- but because the words are written normally, comprehension is immediate and the reader is not distracted. Ditto with drunkenness. Tell us the character has had too much to drink, and then write with normal spellings. For instance:

"You don't happen to happen a match, do you?" She giggled at her own mistake. "Happen to happen a match." She was so amused she couldn't let go of the joke. "Do you know how to happen a match?" Gin makes for such fascinating conversation.

Even this may be calling more attention than necessary to her drunkenness; and once the point is made, you won't have to keep making it.

As for annoying personal habits -- people who constantly digress or interrupt or insert "you know" or "uh-huh" or "see?" into their conversation -- just remember that if it annoys you when a real person does it, it will annoy the reader when a character does it. So you normally don't want to go overboard and make the reader sicken of reading your book by including "realistic" speech that is too repulsive to endure.

In the end, all your characters will sound like you, because you're the one coming up with their words. But they will be clearly differentiated because you have made them come to life as individuals, and their speech will arise out of a different set of concerns and attitudes than the speech of other characters. They will all show aspects of your style of writing -- but within that style, they will be completely different from each other. If you find that no matter what you do, two characters always sound alike and utter interchangeable dialogue, chances are your mistake is that you don't need both of them in the story -- combine them into one character, or develop them more thoroughly as unique individuals with their own desires and attitudes. A seeming dialogue problem turns out, most often, to be a problem of invention and development of character.

-- 14 August 1998

Question 3

Lesson #3

Discussion of Dialogue and Style

Question 3:

My problem with writing is not finding a subject to write about but how to write the dialogue and how to express the characters' thoughts. It would help a lot if you could tell me how you write dialogue. Is there a set of rules that you follow, or what?

-- Submitted by Rhian Hibner

OSC Replies:

Rules and Tricks

Expressing thoughts is a subject I deal with at length in my book Character and Viewpoint; I won't repeat that discussion here, except to say that in contemporary writing, you generally don't set thoughts apart with quotation marks or italic type or underlining. Instead, you treat it as if it were narrative, except that, when necessary, you tag it as thought.

"Nice dress," he said. If only it were on a nicer body, he added silently.

If point of view has been established with deep penetration, you can even get away with:

Rick thought he was being subtle, but some women always know when they're being watched.

"What are you looking at, Mr. Van Orden?"

"Nice dress." Too bad they were out of your size.

"Thanks. My sister and I share all our clothes."

"And you won the toss tonight?"

"What toss?" She looked puzzled.

No doubt the flow of blood to her brain was constricted. "What does your sister wear when you've got the dress?"

"There's more than one dress, silly."

"Oh," said Rick. "People are always having to explain things to me."

"Me too," she said. "Don't you just hate that?"

She leaned in closer and touched his arm. Apparently now they were kindred spirits.

Notice that with deep penetration, the thought "Too bad they were out of your size" needs no tag or even identification as a thought. It's in the same line as the dialogue, but outside the quotes; therefore, the reader knows at once, it is an unspoken thought of the speaker. This allows it to use the second person pronoun, as if these were actual words he was thinking.

With "Apparently now they were kindred spirits," however, the thought does not occur in the same paragraph as a speech, and therefore will be parsed as narrative, not unspoken dialogue. So the pronoun moves to third person: "they were kindred spirits." However, recast that with dialogue, and it can move to second person:

She leaned in closer and touched his arm.

Apparently now we're kindred spirits. "Ouch," he said.

There is no ironclad rule for this, and it can often go either way, depending on how thoroughly you maintain deep penetration.

The only dialogue "trick" I know is one that I learned as a playwright. When you have an extended section of paired dialogue between two people who know each other, you can often make it sizzle by going through and pulling out pairs of speeches here and there. Dialogue that you wrote in a perfectly logical sequence now seems to jump around. It makes it sound like they have livelier wits, or suggests that they know each other so well they don't have to spell everything out.

"Give me back my pen, please."

"It's not your pen."

"I just handed it to you so you could sign the papers."

"I know."

"So it's my pen. Please give it back."

"But the papers took effect the moment I signed them."

"So what?"

"So all our personal property is divided up according to who is in possession of what at the time of signing."

"That does not include my pen!"

"Your lawyer should have stipulated that if it's so important to you."

"This kind of stupid joke is why I hate you."

"But I always loved your complete lack of a sense of humor."

Maybe this dialogue sounds fine to you the way it is. But what if we remove a couple of pairs of speeches? Cut out the pair "I know" and "So it's my pen...." and then the pair "That does not include ..." and "Your lawyer should have ..." and see what you think. You lose something; you gain something.

Notice, however, that brevity is not the goal here -- brevity, in fiction, is rarely the goal. Instead, what is wanted is leaping in the dialogue. In the trimmed version, the characters are catching on quickly enough that they don't need some of the explanation; the readers, too, must make that leap, and it makes them feel clever, too. You could just as easily have added more information by including some of the viewpoint character's thoughts, thereby making the scene longer. Long and short aren't important. Interesting, believable, and clear -- those are what matter. Sometimes those are enhanced by changes that shorten a scene, and sometimes by changes that lengthen it.

-- 14 August 1998

Question 4

Lesson #3

Discussion of Dialogue and Style

Question 4:

I personally think that one of your greatest strengths as a writer is dialogue. I would imagine it has something to do with your time spent writing plays, as those consist almost entirely of dialogue. But I also notice that many of your characters sound like you and your wife (at least as you are in public forums like Life, the Universe and Everything at BYU). How do you go about making your characters sound real when they talk? Do you try to use your own conversations as a model? How would you recommend a new writer learn about writing dialogue?

-- Submitted by Traci R. Klein

OSC Replies:

The Playwriting Connection

Playwriting is indeed a good practice for a writer of fiction, because you don't really understand your own scenes until actors perform them and you watch the audiences watch them. Without changing forms, however, you can get some of that effect simply by reading your own dialogue aloud -- or, better yet, making somebody else read your dialogue aloud and hearing how it sounds. When the reader stumbles over your dialogue or reads it incorrectly -- wrong emphasis, wrong intonation -- it's usually not bad reading, it's bad dialogue. Playwrights learn to "actor-proof" their dialogue (though in fact actors can always find hopelessly wrong readings of dialogue no matter how carefully and clearly the playwright sets it down); a fiction writer can also learn to "reader-proof" his dialogue, to some degree, at least.

Of course, it helps too if you actually pay attention to other people when they talk. Not that you write down their dialogue -- you're a writer, not a reporter. But you get a sense of the music, the word choice, the attitude. That becomes part of your tool chest.

As I said before, though, there's no escaping from your own style. Of course when I have a character speak wittily, he will be witty in precisely the way that I'm witty when I'm trying to be witty. I mean, the person thinking of the dialogue is always going to be me, right? So when I come up with dialogue, I'm "putting on" that character's attitude and improvising as that character -- but all the language is going to have to be my own, because mine is the mind it comes out of. You can make yourself insane trying to write something that doesn't sound like you, because you can't write anything that doesn't sound like you, unless you copy somebody else, and what's the point of that? So you just settle down, create characters, and have them say things the way you would say them if you were they. That's the only character differentiation that's really possible, but if you do it well enough, it's enough.

-- 14 August 1998

Question 5

Lesson #3

Discussion of Dialogue and Style

Question 5:

I would like to use the discussion in Lesson One as a springboard to my own inquiry. I understand that obsessively analyzing the style in which one writes can lead to bigger problems. However, my problem is not with an overall stylistic deficiency, but a very specific one. Through dialogue, the voices of the characters speak with one another. Are there any techniques you can offer which make the process of composing dialogue any easier? (I don't expect a wonder formula, just some methods which would help me organize my thoughts a little better.)

-- Submitted by Jennifer Dittrich

OSC Replies:

Composing Dialogue

The secret is not to think about dialogue as a separate task. You aren't writing dialogue, you're writing an encounter between characters. Part of the encounter is what they say, but part of it is how they react to each other, what they want from each other, what has happened between them in the past, who else is watching and the impression they want to make, and so on. When the characters speak, therefore, they aren't "speaking dialogue," they're using words to do something to the other person -- sometimes to try to get the other person to understand some information, but more often to get the other person to do something or feel something or reveal something. That's what you concentrate on, and then come up with words you might use to accomplish that character's purpose. Sometimes you'll try many different opening lines as a conversation begins, and see where they go; sometimes you'll erase long passages because they don't feel right to you. But the solution to dialogue problems is rarely to "write better dialogue." It's almost always to clarify or change what the character wants or feels or thinks.

Most often, bad dialogue is bad because it's "clunky." The usual cause is that you're trying to "write well," and your idea of writing well comes from the horrible essays you were forced to write in high school and college. Forget all that! But don't forget it just when you're writing dialogue -- that's bad writing even in the essays and papers produced by those very same teachers! Good writing sounds like a person talking. Your narrative sections should be written in fluid language that can easily be read aloud. In other words, your narrative should sound like dialogue spoken by a good storyteller!

So if you worry about your writing style, especially your dialogue writing, chances are that the problem you have is that you are worrying about your writing style instead of worrying about what happens and why in the story! Bad style is almost invariably the result of trying for "good style," because "good style" is invariably defined by writing teachers and the students who believe them as "writing like someone else who writes better than you." But you can't write like them, because you're not them and their voice isn't your voice. You can only write well when you write the way you talk, only more clearly and precisely. If you are laboriously constructing your sentences, searching in the thesaurus for "just the right word," you are almost certainly writing unreadably; and, while you might only notice it in your dialogue, chances are you are writing badly all the time.

How do you cure this destructive habit? Let me give you a parallel example. When I was a child, I had a lyric boy-soprano voice, complete with vibrato. I sang high and sweetly, and that ability to sing was an important part of who I was. But when my voice changed, the "high" was gone and so was the sweet. Grimly determined to get my voice back, I forced a vibrato using very bad technique -- a strained, rapid diaphragmatic vibrato rather than one that arises from a relaxed throat. It made my voice sound eccentric and unpleasant -- and the tightness that resulted severely limited my range. I went through my college career with that voice, even though I knew it didn't sound all that good, because I didn't know how to do it better.

Then I went to Brazil as a missionary. Nobody there knew me as a performer. No one cared how I sang. I stripped away the old pretense and sang "straight," with clear tone, no vibrato at all. I learned to relax my throat. I sounded like nothing; and then, to my surprise, a genuine, relaxed vibrato began to enter my voice on sustained notes. And my singing range increased, both higher and lower. When I came home, my singing voice was a far more versatile and powerful instrument than it had ever been before. During my forced-vibrato years, I couldn't "do voices" -- I could only sing the one way. Now I could take my relaxed voice and shape it to sound like an old man singing, or a child, or an untrained singer, or an operatic buffoon. I could sing conversationally; I could sing formally. I had my voice at last.

But I had to stop trying to force my voice and just relax, concentrating on the song and not the singer. Before I could sing well, I had to stop trying to sing well and concentrate on singing clearly, singing to the audience.

And if you don't understand how this applies to writing style, I'm not a good enough writer to explain it to you any better.

-- 14 August 1998

Lesson #4

Beginnings

If you mess up the opening, nothing you do later in the story will fix it. And because mistakes in the opening will reverberate through the rest of the story, when you finally do fix the opening you usually have to throw out and redo everything that you wrote after it. With rare exceptions, you simply have to get the opening right before you can go on.

But what is the "opening"? The first sentence? Having a good first sentence is nice, but it's not the opening. By definition, the first sentence is in the first paragraph, and the first paragraph is free. That is, the first paragraph of a story does not have to be in the same voice or mood or tone as the rest of the work. The first paragraph is important for setting the scene, for giving vital information that allows what follows to make sense. But the real opening is after that first paragraph -- when the story starts in earnest.

It's easier to demonstrate the difference between effective and ineffective openings by looking at examples from drafts of the same story. But what writer is insane enough to put his failures out for public display.

Well, it happens that in working on the next Ender novel (working title: **Bean**), I had to essay four openings before I got one that worked. Notice I didn't say "the right *one*." That's because there isn't just one "right" opening, anymore than there's ever just one right sentence or one right word. But after three openings, each closer to being right but still wrong, the fourth opening is finally one that can lead into the novel I mean to write.

So let me tell you just enough about the project that you'll see why the first three openings don't work, and why the fourth one does. **Bean** is designed to be the true sequel that **Ender's Game** never had. The existing Ender sequels are really a different kind of novel. Many readers prefer **Speaker for the Dead** and its sequels, because they appreciate that kind of science fiction. But those who really like the kind of science fiction that **Ender's Game** represents -- emotionally involving, character-rich, fast-moving, with young characters risking their lives for high stakes -- might appreciate a sequel that takes place during and immediately after the events of **Ender's Game,** following the life of one of Ender's companions in the Battle School.

The project, therefore, is to create a novel that speaks to the same audience as, and delivers an experience similar to, **Ender's Game**, but which will be a good novel in its own right even for people who have never read the first volume in the series.

Which brings us to the first opening.

Version 1

Chapter 1

Urchin

Rotterdam was once a bright city in a nation of light.

Then the Netherlands, in its last gracious gesture, gave itself to the International Alliance, believing that other nations would follow suit, that nationhood would fade away and the unity forced on humankind by the brutal invasion by aliens would become universal and permanent. Instead, as the only territory completely under the control of the International Congress, this small nation became the stepchild of politics. Perpetually underfunded and yet forced by law to allow any refugee from any nation in the world to enter and take up residence among the "citizens of the world," the Netherlands had become the most overcrowded, poverty-stricken nation in the world. Gone were the fields of tulips, gone the quiet graciousness of life. Not one person in a hundred spoke Dutch; not one person in ten had a decent job. The understaffed police did their best to keep order. But there was no order to be kept. And of all the cities of the Netherlands -- now the IZ, the International Zone -- Rotterdam was the largest, the most overcrowded, the least orderly. It was the city where hope became desperation.

It was a city of lost children.

They flooded the streets, swarming around people who looked like money, begging or picking pockets right in front of the police. They descended like locusts on the markets, until the merchants hired thugs to beat them away with sticks. The corpses of starved children, of stabbed or beaten children, of children dead of cold, were found daily -- only the body count was listed in the netrags. There were no names to write about. These children had no identity. They had burst into the world like pus from a boil, and if they once had parents who wanted to love or know them, it made no difference now. Somewhere in the world children went to school. Somewhere children played in gardens. But in Rotterdam children burrowed into the dumpsters to eat and then to sleep. In Rotterdam, the strong and cruel and heartless children made sure that the weaker ones never got near the soup kitchens and hostel.

Rotterdam was the darkest city in a nation of shadows.

*

What's wrong with this opening? The main problem is that it's not an opening at all -- it's a prologue. It sets the scene, and I can imagine some novels where scene-setting is vital. For instance, **Pastwatch: The Redemption of Christopher Columbus** required (and has) just such a prologue.

But there is nothing in this prologue that I can't reveal later. In fact, this prologue actually represents nothing more than my thinking out loud. I had just decided, arbitrarily, that the city where Bean is a street urchin would be Rotterdam; and because today's Rotterdam is a pleasant city in a provident nation, I had to think of some reason why it would become a place where street urchins would be desperately struggling for survival. These few paragraphs were the result.

So I'll hang onto them as working notes, but nothing more. They'll never appear in the finished book.

Instead, I realized, what was needed was character -- specifically, Bean himself. I needed to see the city, not through the eyes of some distant narrator, but through the eyes of a child who was living on those streets. So here is the second try:

Version 2

Chapter 1

Urchin

He had no name. Or rather, if he ever had a name, he did not know it. He knew that before he lived on the streets of Rotterdam, he used to live in another place, but in his vague memories of a sterile white-and-metal place with beds and babies and adults moving about, he did not remember any voice calling him anything at all. He used to be there. Now he was here. And here, survival depended on nobody noticing him at all.

He had to live by scavenging. Not stealing -- that was impossible to a child of four. He was too small and weak and slow to get past the guards at the market doors, and in the open markets, anything he managed to steal would be taken from him immediately by an older boy. Instead he had to look for food that was spilled or dropped or thrown away. He became adept at getting sugar or oils off wrapping paper; he was the last scavenger, gnawing at the already-picked-clean bones of the city. He was hungry all the time.

In fact, he was dying, though he didn't understand that. At age four, his growth was so stunted that he looked like a child of three, or even two. He walked on rickety bowed legs; his belly was distended; his arms were so thin that he seemed almost as antlike as the Buggers whose terrifying image loomed over every street and jumped out of every screen and holodisplay. He did not understand that because of his physical condition, he was supposed to be mentally sluggish, withdrawing from life. So he passed his time observing, not only the disposition of every wrapper, every crumb, every splash, but also the people who moved along the street.

Every street urchin knew how to evaluate their targets, the adults who tried to go about their business, ignoring the beggars and evading the thieves. The children who couldn't size up generosity or the ease of theft or the likelihood of careless spillage did not last long.

But he was beyond that fundamental skill. What he watched with most interest now were the other children. Unlike adults, who saw them only as a stampede of oversized jabbering rats, to be stepped over or kicked aside, to him the other children were endlessly fascinating. For on every streetcorner there was a shifting pattern of power. At first, it seemed that the most rough and brutal boy -- for it was almost always a boy -- was the one who ruled. But that turned out to be only partly true. For the other children became adept at avoiding him or hiding things from him, even as they made an outward show of doing whatever he might demand of them. And the obedience lasted only as long as the bully was present.

The real bosses were also bigger and stronger than most children, but they made no great display of their physical force. In fact, when the bully was present, the real boss was often the most obsequious, offering no challenge whatsoever, but deftly turning the bully's wrath away from children who were under the boss's protection. And unlike the bully, the boss made sure that within his little territory, there was some sharing out of resources, some justice, some security.

Some. Not much. For death was always near. The police, when they came through, did not regard the children as human; they lashed out with batons and if a child dropped to the ground and never rose again, there would be no repercussions. And when a new bully moved into a territory, there would have to be a display of power -- several of the protector-bosses died at times like that. Still, this four-year-old nameless observer watched and learned.

It was not abstract scientific curiosity that drove him, however. For at some level, he must have understood that his own slim hope of survival depended on decoding the society of children so that he

could find a way to insert himself into it, despite his utter lack of value to anyone, despite the look of death that clung to him. He had no leverage, no coin to spend, no gift to give that would win him the protection of a boss; so he would have to invent something.

That was why he had chosen this garbage can to sit on, and this one particular corner to observe.

*

This is not a prologue. This is definitely the opening of the story I want to tell. Bean, sitting on a garbage can, watching.

But I had misgivings. I realized I didn't trust the material, because I felt impelled to send it to my editor, Beth Meacham, to ask her for her response. And while Beth was kind, she pointed out that sometimes it didn't feel like a child thinking. Too abstract. Especially the paragraph where it says, "It was not abstract scientific curiosity that drove him, however."

As soon as Beth pointed this out, I realized what I had done. (My former writing students will recognize it, too!) That sentence is an egregious violation of point of view. Supposedly I was viewing the city through Bean's eyes. But instead, I got so caught up in the exposition of Bean's past, that I inadvertently slipped into the same distant voice I had used in describing the city in the previous version. If there's one thing that violates point of view, it's telling what the character is *not* thinking!

Now, the problem is not that I violated some arbitrary rule about point of view. My violation of point of view merely *revealed* the problem: that I was still not as fully engaged in the character of Bean as the story required.

The voice was hopelessly wrong -- too distant and elevated, too writerly -- and the strategy was also wrong -- too much exposition of the past, nothing to root us in the present moment. What I needed to do, I decided, was create Bean as a human being, to get inside his mind, not just show him from the outside, as if through the wrong end of a telescope. What did it feel like to be living his life?

Which brings us to version 3.

Version 3

Chapter 1

Urchin

The boy was four years old, but he was small for his age, his belly distended with hunger, his limbs emaciated, his joints prominent. He looked like death. But his mind was as alive and alert as ever, his eyes were still bright with intelligence, and he had no intention of becoming one of the bodies scooped up by the Rotterdam street cleaners as they did their rounds every morning.

He perched on a garbage can in the shadow of an alley, where he could watch the people passing on the street. In the street economy, he was at the bottom, living by licking wrappers and dabbing up crumbs from the street with a damp finger. He ate as much fine gravel as food -- the crumbs that didn't dissolve

in his mouth were stone -- but he swallowed it all, in case some nutrition clung to it. Real food was always snatched up by larger children, who often fought over it. The struggle could be brutal. A child his size had no chance in the melee.

He remembered a better place, shiny and clean, with adults who spoke to him and fed him. He had learned language there. He played with toys and the adults watched him closely. But he couldn't remember ever being addressed by name. If he had a name, he did not know what it was, and could not remember where that place was. He didn't much care. He couldn't eat a name.

Other children had food. Not a lot of it, but enough that they weren't dying. He knew better than to ask them for it -- there wasn't any to spare. Nor was he stupid enough to try to steal it. Weak as he was, he could not hope to be quick, and they were too alert for stealth to do him any good. Still, they had food, he didn't, and if he watched them carefully enough, he would think of something.

He grasped almost at once that these children, who patrolled the intersection of XXXX and XXXX, were not just individuals who had worked out some allotment of territory, as was common among the beggars and thieves and whores, whether adults or children. The children he was watching were younger and weaker, and instead of dividing up their territory, they were working it cooperatively, scavenging and stealing what they could, then bringing it back to be shared.

The leader of this little beggars' commune was a nine-year-old that the other kids called Poke. Was Poke a boy or a girl? It was impossible to tell, and probably didn't matter. Poke was the arbiter of disputes between the younger children, the distributor of whatever food or other goods were brought in. It was obvious why the others trusted Poke -- the distribution was always fair, and Poke took no larger share than anyone else.

The boy who watched saw more than just this group, however. He also saw how they shied away from the bullies who preyed on little ones. These bullies were only slightly larger -- ten-, eleven-, twelve-year-olds -- and they were not strong enough or bright enough to snatch a living on their own. Instead, they used their size advantage to scavenge from the bottom feeders -- from the smallest children, or from weak or dying adults. It was the bullies, too, who drove the younger, weaker children from the food lines at the charity houses, where nutritious meals were served to those strong enough to fight their way into the line. Adults sometimes policed the lines, of course, but it was futile. A younger child who defied the ban of the bullies and got in under the protection of adults would get his meal; but he had to leave sometime, and the bully, on the theory that the meal the youngling ate belonged to him, would punish mercilessly. If it didn't kill the interloper outright, the beating would weaken him enough that he would die soon enough anyway. Not that it mattered. By the time a young one was desperate enough to defy the ban, he was dying anyway. The stolen meal was a taste of heaven.

The watching boy was not ready for the taste of heaven that led to death. Instead, he was thinking of a way to get past the bullies, to get into the charity soup kitchens, and do it over and over, without punishment. He could not do it alone.

*

I stopped there because I knew something was still wrong. But what?

I did as I always do (and as I had done with the previous two openings): I showed it to my wife, Kristine. She read it. She liked it. But then she said, "Isn't this supposed to be like Ender's Game? Ender's Game

began with a scene, with action -- Ender's visit to the doctor where his monitor gets removed and he goes into convulsions."

At once I knew why I hadn't been able to go on. I had been right that the opening needed to concentrate on Bean; but I was wrong to think that it should be from Bean's point of view. Soon enough I would get inside his head and stay there through most (but not all) of the novel. But the first section needed to be from outside him. Why? Because we weren't ready for his thought processes yet. We had to see him in action, and then *wonder* how this kid's mind worked.

This is an important choice, in part because it violates one of the rules of storytelling -- to establish quickly the viewpoint you intend to use. Whoever you use as your initial viewpoint character will feel very important to the reader -- the character has to amount to something in the story, even if the focus quickly moves away. It's a tricky technique to use, because of the extra expectations that you will now have to fulfil. Knowing that, however, I felt confident that I could start with a different point of view and still move the story to Bean's viewpoint when I needed to. You can break any rule, as long as you're willing and able to pay the price.

I *had* been right about needing to start from a child's point of view of the life of the street, instead of that distant omniscient narrator. The mistake was only in using Bean for that job. In fact, my clue to myself that I had unconsciously known this all along was the decision not to give him a name until another child of the streets names him. To have an unnamed viewpoint character is almost always a hopelessly bad choice, because you have to keep referring common-noun tags like "the boy," as if he were the only one in the world. The circumlocutions needed to maintain a consistent viewpoint without having a simple nametag on the character become tedious and annoying to the reader. By declining to name Bean, I had been telling myself that he was not the right viewpoint character for the opening.

It took Kristine pointing out the lack of action to make this clear. Inside Bean's viewpoint, I was not free to begin at once with action, because I had to explain what his actions meant to him -- what his intentions were. Using another character's viewpoint, however, I did not have to explain Bean's motive. He could begin as an enigmatic, somewhat dangerous character.

And since I had just created the gender-ambiguous nine-year-old Poke, the obvious thing was to use her point of view. However, she did not exist until I had written the third version. And until she existed, I didn't have the option of using her point of view. So I had to write each version in order to find out enough about the story to be able to write the next. None of this was wasted time, even if the text was fated to be discarded in favor of a new version.

At last, when I finished this fourth version, I had an opening that did the job that it needed to do. The focus by the end is on Bean, but the exposition is relatively painless, and Poke becomes an interesting character (to me at least) in her own right. I think you'll see the obvious improvement.

Version 4

Chapter 1

Urchin

Poke kept her eyes open all the time. The younger children were supposed to be on watch, too, and sometimes they could be quite observant, but they just didn't notice all the things they needed to notice, and that meant that Poke could only depend on herself to see danger.

There was plenty of danger to watch for. The cops, for instance. They didn't show up often, but when they did, they seemed especially bent on clearing the streets of children. They would flail about them with their magnetic whips, landing cruel stinging blows on even the smallest children, haranguing them as vermin, thieves, pestilence, a plague on the fair city of Rotterdam. It was Poke's job to notice when a disturbance in the distance suggested that the cops might be running a sweep. Then she would give the alarm whistle and the little ones would rush to their hiding places till the danger was past.

But the cops didn't come by that often. The real danger was much more immediate -- big kids. Poke, at age nine, was the matriarch of her little crew (not that any of them knew for sure that she was a girl), but that cut no ice with the eleven- and twelve- and thirteen-year-old boys and girls who bullied their way around the streets. The adult-size beggars and thieves and whores of the street paid no attention to the little kids except to kick them out of the way. But the older children, who were among the kicked, turned around and preyed on the younger ones. Any time Poke's crew found something to eat -- especially if they located a dependable source of garbage or an easy mark for a coin or a bit of food -- they had to watch jealously and hide their winnings, for the bullies liked nothing better than to take away whatever scraps of food the little ones might have. Stealing from younger children was much safer than stealing from shops or passersby. And they enjoyed it, Poke could see that. They liked how the little kids cowered and obeyed and whimpered and gave them whatever they demanded.

So when the scrawny little two-year-old took up a perch on a garbage can across the street, Poke, being observant, saw him at once. The kid was on the edge of starvation. No, the kid was starving. Thin arms and legs, joints that looked ridiculously oversized, a distended belly. And if hunger didn't kill him soon, the onset of autumn would, because his clothing was thin and there wasn't much of it even at that.

Normally she wouldn't pay any attention to the walking dead. But this one had eyes. He was still looking around with intelligence. None of that stupor of the walking dead, no longer searching for food or even caring to find a comfortable place to lie while breathing their last taste of the stinking air of Rotterdam. After all, death would not be such a change for them. Everyone knew that Rotterdam was, if not the capital, then the main seaport of Hell. The only difference between Rotterdam and death was that with Rotterdam, the damnation wasn't eternal.

This little boy -- what was he doing? Not looking for food. He wasn't eyeing the pedestrians. Which was just as well -- there was no chance that anyone would leave anything for a child that small. Anything he might get would be taken away by any other child, so why should he bother? If he wanted to survive, he should be following older scavengers and licking food wrappers behind them, getting the last sheen of sugar or dusting of flour clinging to the packaging, whatever the first comer hadn't licked off. There was nothing for this child out here on the street, not unless he got taken in by a crew, and Poke wouldn't have him. He'd be nothing but a drain, and her kids were already having a hard enough time without adding another useless mouth.

He's going to ask, she thought. He's going to whine and beg. But that only works on the rich people. I've got my crew to think of. He's not one of them, so I don't care about him. Even if he is small. He's nothing to me.

A couple of twelve-year-old hookers who didn't usually work this strip rounded a corner, heading toward

Poke's base. She gave a low whistle. The kids immediately drifted apart, staying on the street but trying not to look like a crew.

It didn't help. The hookers knew already that Poke was a crew boss, and sure enough, they caught her by the arms and slammed her against a wall and demanded their "permission" fee. Poke knew better than to claim she had nothing to share -- she always tried to keep a reserve in order to placate hungry bullies. These hookers, Poke could see why they were hungry. They didn't look like what the pedophiles wanted, when they came cruising through. They were too gaunt, too old-looking. So until they grew bodies and started attracting the slightly-less-perverted trade, they had to resort to scavenging. It made Poke's blood boil, to have them steal from her and her crew, but it was smarter to pay them off. If they beat her up, she couldn't look out for her crew now, could she? So she took them to one of her stashes and came up with a little bakery bag that still had half a pastry in it.

It was stale, since she'd been holding it for a couple of days for just such an occasion, but the two hookers grabbed it, tore open the bag, and one of them bit off more than half before offering the remainder to her friend. Or rather, her former friend, for of such predatory acts are feuds born. The two of them started fighting, screaming at each other, slapping, raking at each other with clawed hands. Poke watched closely, hoping that they'd drop the remaining fragment of pastry, but no such luck. It went into the mouth of the same girl who had already eaten the first bite -- and it was that first girl who won the fight too, sending the other one running for refuge.

Poke turned around, and there was the little boy right behind her. She nearly tripped over him. Angry as she was at having had to give up food to those street-whores, she gave him a knee and knocked him to the ground. "Don't stand behind people if you don't want to land on your butt," she snarled.

He simply got up and looked at her, expectant, demanding.

"No, you little bastard, you're not getting nothing from me," said Poke. "I'm not taking one bean out of the mouths of my crew, you aren't worth a bean."

Her crew was starting to reassemble, now that the bullies had passed.

"Why you give your food to them?" said the boy. "You need that food."

"Oh, excuse me!" said Poke. She raised her voice, so her crew could hear her. "I guess you ought to be the crew boss here, is that it? You being so big, you got no trouble keeping the food."

"Not me," said the boy. "I'm not worth a bean, remember?"

"Yeah, I remember. Maybe you ought to remember and shut up."

Her crew laughed.

But the little boy didn't. "You got to get your own bully," he said.

"I don't get bullies, I get rid of them," Poke answered. She didn't like the way he kept talking, standing up to her. In a minute she was going to have to hurt him.

"You give food to bullies every day. Give that to one bully and get him to keep the others away from you."

"You think I never thought of that, stupid?" she said. "Only once he's bought, how I keep him? He won't fight for us."

"If he won't, then kill him," said the boy.

That made Poke mad, the stupid impossibility of it, the power of the idea that she knew she could never lay hands on. She gave him a knee again, and this time kicked him when he went down. "Maybe I start by killing you."

"I'm not worth a bean, remember?" said the boy. "You kill one bully, get another to fight for you, he want your food, he scared of you too."

She didn't know what to say to such a preposterous idea.

"They eating you up," said the boy. "Eating you up. So you got to kill one. Get him down, everybody as small as me. Stones crack any size head."

"You make me sick," she said.

"Cause you didn't think of it," he said.

He was flirting with death, talking to her that way. If she injured him at all, he'd be finished, he must know that.

But then, he had death living with him inside his flimsy little shirt already. Hard to see how it would matter if death came any closer.

Poke looked around at her crew. She couldn't read their faces.

"I don't need no baby telling me to kill what we can't kill."

"Little kid come up behind him, you shove, he fall over," said the boy. "Already got you some big stones, bricks. Hit him in the head. When you see brains you done."

"He no good to me dead," she said. "I want my own bully, he keep us safe, I don't want no dead one."

The boy grinned. "So now you like my idea," he said.

"Can't trust no bully," she answered.

"He watch out for you at the charity kitchen," said the boy. "You get in at the kitchen." He kept looking her in the eye, but he was talking for the others to hear. "He get you all in at the kitchen."

"Little kid get into the kitchen, the big kids, they beat him," said Sergeant. He was eight, and mostly

acted like he thought he was Poke's second-in-command, though truth was she didn't have a second.

"You get you a bully, he make them go away."

"How he stop two bullies? Three bullies?" asked Sergeant.

"Like I said," the boy answered. "You push him down, he not so big. You get your rocks. You be ready. Ben't you a soldier? Don't they call you Sergeant?"

"Stop talking to him, Sarge," said Poke. "I don't know why any of us is talking to some two-year-old."

"I'm four," said the boy.

"What your name?" asked Poke.

"Nobody ever said no name for me," he said.

"You mean you so stupid you can't remember your own name?"

"Nobody ever said no name," he said again. Still he looked her in the eye, lying there on the ground, the crew around him.

"Ain't worth a bean," she said.

"Am so," he said.

"Yeah," said Sergeant. "One damn bean."

"So now you got a name," said Poke. "You go back and sit on that garbage can, I think about what you said."

"I need something to eat," said Bean.

"If I get me a bully, if what you said works, then maybe I give you something."

"I need something now," said Bean.

She knew it was true.

She reached into her pocket and took out six peanuts she had been saving. He sat up and took just one from her hand, put it in his mouth and slowly chewed.

"Take them all," she said impatiently.

He held out his little hand. It was weak. He couldn't make a fist. "Can't hold them all," he said. "Don't hold so good."

Damn. She was wasting perfectly good peanuts on a kid who was going to die anyway.

But she was going to try his idea. It was audacious, but it was the first plan she'd ever heard that offered any hope of making things better, of changing something about their miserable life without her having to put on girl clothes and going into business. And since it was his idea, the crew had to see that she treated him fair. That's how you stay crew boss, they always see you be fair.

So she kept holding her hand out while he ate all six peanuts, one at a time.

After he swallowed the last one, he looked her in the eye for another long moment, and then said, "You better be ready to kill him."

"I want him alive."

"Be ready to kill him if he ain't the right one." With that, Bean toddled back across the street to his garbage can and laborious climbed on top again to watch.

"You ain't no four years old!" Sergeant shouted over to him.

"I'm four but I'm just little," he shouted back.

Poke hushed Sergeant up and they went looking for stones and bricks and cinderblocks. If they were going to have a little war, they'd best be armed.

*

Notice how much longer this is. That's because I knew, instinctively, that this was working, this was right. And so the floodgates could open. I could start playing with the language of the street; I could start creating incidental characters. Scenes unfolded. Voices emerged. I only stopped at this point because it was time to put in a blank line and move, at last, to Bean's point of view. For now that he has a name, I'm ready to get inside his head as he watches Poke's attempt to follow his plan.

In fact, the recruitment of a bully to be the protector of this streetcorner crew has now become a powerful, closed story in my mind. Characters from this opening will return, of course; Bean himself will emerge from the opening chapter to go on to Battle School. Notice that "the opening" is not the entirety of the first chapter in this case. It consists mostly of the one extended scene between Bean and Poke; when that scene ends, the opening is over, even though the chapter will go on to achieve its own closure and be a strong story in its own right. (That's why I can't tell you any more of the storyline than this -- because I intend to offer the first chapter as a separate story to one of the sf magazines.)

What matters is that not until I got the opening right did the story start to open up for me. Now, I could have forced my way through using any of these openings, and the result might even have been a pretty good book. But it wasn't coming to life in my own mind. I was coming up against a wall each time -- later, mind you, so I knew I was getting closer, but still there was a wall, my unconscious mind telling me that I couldn't trust this opening, I couldn't hang a story from it.

When it did work, then I could flow on. It "wrote itself" -- that is, I never had to stop and ponder, for ideas just popped into my head the moment my fingers needed to have something to type. For me at

least, that's when it's working, that's when I know the story is alive. Of course, you may have a different opinion -- but you aren't the one who has to write the story. I am! So if it comes to life for *me*, then I can write it. Your story, obviously, has to come to life for *you*.

If the opening is wrong, there's almost no point in going on until it's right. And to fix an opening, you don't edit it or rewrite the sentences -- what a pointless exercise that would have been! There are probably sentences that could use honing in all these versions. So what? That's what you do during the copy edit. What matters in the opening is the structure: viewpoint, voice, event, cause -- what happens, to whom, why, with what result, and what it means to the characters. Those are the pieces from which stories are constructed. Word choice and sentence structure are trivial matters by comparison. There are hundreds of sentences ranging from adequate to superb that will work well enough, if the story is right; but there is no sentence so exquisitely written that it will make a bad story feel like a good one to the audience. That's what the opening is about -- not finding language, but finding structure and character, causality and judgment.

With any luck, seeing the progression through failed versions to one that works will be helpful to you as you look at your own openings. It should also be encouraging, for those of you who have not yet published anything, that after the dozens of stories I've written, each new project is a fresh start, with a whole new set of mistakes to make, and a whole new set of problems to solve. We're all novices with every story, because each new story is one you've never told before.

-- 29 October 1998

Lesson #5

Rather than answering a specific question, for Lesson #5 OSC has written a critique to the first chapter of a story that includes flaws common among new writers.

Donald sat in the corner of the room, barely illuminated by the dim moonlight filtering through the window. He was trembling badly; the events of the last few hours still storming through his mind. How the hell could he have known? How could he have known? He brought his shaking hands up to his face, and as he hid behind them the smell of fresh gunpowder brought the sickening moment back to him in full force. Tears began to stream down his rugged face, and he was soon racked with sobbing convulsions.

Outside, car horns honked and people scampered about their business. In short, life went on. Donald however knew that life also ended. Just three hours ago, he'd seen to that fact first hand. There were doctors, lawyers, teachers, cooks, government workers, and killers. Though at times Donald had a hard time separating the government workers from the killers. Donald was a member of the last group; a killer. Not by trade mind you, he'd joined that group only in the last three hours. In actuality he was a computer game consultant. He played video games all day, and told the designers what was wrong, or for that matter, what was right with their new products.

At 6'2" he was a formidable presence. He was well muscled and his appearance would make you walk on the other side of the street if you happened to run into him. He instilled fear in you, made you question whether or not you'd survive an encounter with him if you ran into him when he was in a bad mood; he was holding himself and rocking uncontrollably like a child in the corner.

The day had begun just like any other. He'd gotten up at the crack of dawn, looked over at his sleeping wife and child. Actually, he just saw his gorgeous young wife lying sound asleep, her left hand resting upon her growing stomach. Linda was six months pregnant; their first child. A smile quickly grew as Donald began to anticipate the birth of their son. He knew that he was going to have a son. There had been no sonogram; Linda would not allow it. She insisted that to have the procedure would be to take away one of the most precious gifts that nature had to offer parents. Donald had grudgingly agreed to wait and see what nature had lined up for the happy couple.

He leaned over and planted a tender kiss on his wife's forehead and began to get dressed for work. Linda would probably wake up and take her morning walk for her exercise. Donald made sure to remember to write her a note and hang it from the door so there'd be no chance that she would miss seeing it. They'd been married for six 8 months and since that day he could not believe that he'd been so fortunate. At first, his friends could not believe that anyone as gorgeous as Linda would show Donald the time of day. Not a day went by that Donald didn't thank whoever was responsible for bringing them together, or think that he would wake up and find that she was just a fantasy.

The drive to the office was uneventful until he pulled off of the freeway exit for his office complex. As he was slowing down to the posted speed limit, some hotshot in a bright red sports car roared past him on the right. The driver was riding the shoulder of the exit ramp, and as he past Donald's car, he pulled right in front and deliberately slowed; almost to a crawl. The driver's left hand flew out of his window and offered it's middle finger to Donald's stunned gaze. "What the hell did I do to this guy? I didn't cut him off, didn't even know he was there until he pulled alongside me to pass. Jeez, what's his problem?" Donald asked himself.

The driver in front of him began to speed a little, pulling ahead of him, and for a moment Donald thought that their brief encounter was over. Just as he reached over and began to change the radio station, his peripheral vision brought the car into his view. The driver was alongside the shoulder again, only this time the car was stopped, and the son of a bitch was standing outside of his car. Nothing too alarming, but Donald had time to see the gun that the man was holding. Had time to see that it was indeed pointed at his car. Panic began to take over, and he didn't know whether he should duck and speed past the car, or ram into him and take the sick bastard out. In the time that it took him to decide, his windshield exploded in a flurry of broken glass.

The shot must have been through the right side, or he'd been incredibly lucky as he'd not been shot. Donald screamed, and slammed the accelerator down to the ground. "Son of a bitch. Son of a bitch. Oh my God. The son of a bitch shot at me! Holy shit!" Risking a glance in the rear view mirror showed Donald that the maniac was not following. He drove through the tollbooth at the end of the exit ramp, and saw the pissed off toll booth attendant leaning out of his booth waving his flabby arms at Donald. He just couldn't believe what had just happened. There was *no* reason that he could come up with for what had just happened.

Did he somehow know the driver of the red car? Playing the event back in his mind, he couldn't even remember what the driver looked like. Plate number? Yeah, right. There'd been time enough to get that information. Was he Black? White? It was a guy, right?? Donald began to slow a little as he realized he was now driving through residential streets at almost 70 miles per hour. All he needed now was a collision with another car, or God-forbid, a pedestrian. Another glance at the rear view mirror, and he felt confident that the driver had not followed him. He began to look in earnest for a police officer or a cruiser. This surely had to be reported. He glanced down at his cellular phone. He could just call the cops, tell them where he was, and wait for them to find him. He should call Linda and tell her what had just happened. Yeah, that would be smart. Just what a pregnant woman needed to hear as she opened her eyes from a deep sleep. No, he'd call the cops, give his location, and wait for them to find him.

How the hell was he supposed to know that the shooter was sitting in his car, police scanner in hand waiting for him to do just that?

-- Submitted by Scott M. Hollander

OSC Replies:

I can tell you right now, this story is dead in the water because of this most common and most awful of openings. This is the standard "she drove through the snow, tears flowing down her cheeks, thinking through the events of the past few days" opening that wrecks story after story. At least you have the consolation of knowing that *everybody else* makes this mistake too.

What you're doing with this kind of opening is: You are forcing us to face the character's raw emotions without giving us *any* information about the story or any reason to care about the character. It is the opposite of how it has to work. We should not face the emotions until we completely understand the entire situation so that we will feel those emotions ourselves -- and then the character does *not* have to "tremble badly" and waste our time sitting around while memories "storm" through his mind.

You certainly don't have the liberty of showing the ironic contrast between Donald's suffering while outside traffic moves on oblivious. That's the *closing* shot of the movie, not the opening.

Then, when you do start giving us actual information, because you've given us intense emotion to begin with, the info you give us feels weirdly disconnected -- he's there trembling, having just become a killer, and you're going to tell us about his *career*? You're going to tell us how *tall* he is? Without first telling us what the hell he just did that he's trembling about? No, you have strained the audience too far.

When you reach for emotions the story has not earned, we call it "sentimental" or "melodramatic."

Paragraph 3 makes another common but killer mistake. You are trying to establish his point of view, to see the world through his eyes. However, this description is completely from outside himself -- in fact, it consists of the omniscient viewpoint in which the author talks to the reader, and the character is viewed as through a telescope, from a distance. There is no reason to describe him like this. How would you handle the physical information about him through his point of view? For instance, "Ever since puberty gave him a large frame and heavy muscles, he had been aware that he scared people just a little. Without doing anything at all, he made smaller men nervous. Some women, though, were drawn to men who looked intimidating -- except on dark nights, when they would see him coming and cross the street." That sort of thing -- from inside his mind, how he feels about it, the experiences he has had with it.

By the way, a good mother does not refuse a sonogram. She just refuses to look at it herself. The sonogram is how the doctor checks how the baby is lying, looks for heartbeat, body development, etc. It would be absurd to refuse to have one done. If you don't want to know the sex, don't look and don't ask. Amniocentesis, however, is another matter -- a small percentage of cases cause spontaneous abortion, ending the pregnancy, and since the things you find out from amnio are all things you can't do anything about *except* abortion, why bother if you have no intention of aborting the baby no matter what?

Your description of his love and happiness is not working. Why? Because it's all vague and abstract and cliched. Heavens, you even have his happiness founded in the fact that she is so "gorgeous," not because she is a human being who is interesting. If you want us to actually care about their relationship, then *show it*. Begin this story with a scene between them, showing how they handle conflict resolution in a happy way, showing her as a funny, interesting person, giving her quirks that are endearing and showing a relationship founded on something other than lust or pride in a trophy wife. Let us find out about the pregnancy, not because of thoughts, but because they talk about it, because her belly is beginning to get in the way of her work, etc. Unfold the relationship in a *scene* that is *about* something.

Now, the story finally comes to life when you have the traffic confrontation. But why not begin the story with that? Guy driving to work, that's perfectly normal. You want an action start, this one works. Plenty of time to get the other stuff while he's sitting at the side of the road, sans windshield, waiting for the cops. *However*, while the "how the hell was he supposed to know" line was effective as grabby writing, in fact it is such an egregious violation of point of view that basically you have decided not to let character matter in the tale. Definitely a distant voice, narrator firmly in charge.

Two opening strategies, then, would work:

1. The Life Interrupted: Start with a scene at home, funny, interesting, idyllic, and then interrupt it with the traffic incident. However, the first sentence could still be along the lines of: "Donald Blank did not wake up and say, Today I think I'll kill a man" or some such other line that signals us that life and death matters are at hand. You can do that in the first paragraph, and the first paragraph only, because it is "free." I'm not advising you to do it -- I think it's better just to let it unfold. The story will be interesting enough if you make the relationship interesting enough.

2. Action Jackson: Start with the traffic incident, and flash back to the morning scene with wife (he thinks of her because of how that bullet could have left her a widow with an unborn child; that if he died, he would never have known the child; someone else would have raised him; what kind of bastard would do that to his family over some traffic thing, etc. -- all within his point of view, all tied to the present moment). No need for a cute opening sentence in this opening. However, he will not be as real a character to us -- more like everyman than *this* particular man. Either strategy would work well, however.

And either way, you *cannot* tell us that the shooter was sitting in his car, police scanner in hand. Instead, you have him call, wait for the cops, and then be shocked when the shooter shows up. Then he realizes -- the guy has a police scanner. When I call the cops, I call him! It will work just as well to have the realization after the fact -- and does not violate point of view. Thus you can have your cake and eat it too -- the frisson of realizing the "cool idea" of the story (i.e., highway shooter who uses police scanner to find his victims before the cops do) and also the close identification with character that is possible when point of view is intensely maintained.

-- 17 November 1998

Lesson #6

Question 1:

Do I need an agent?

-- Submitted by Anonymous

OSC Replies:

Depends on the field you're writing in. If you're writing sf or fantasy, an agent is *not* needed at first. In fact, the kind of agent you can get before your first offer from a publisher is not the kind of agent you want afterward, as a general rule. So for sf and fantasy, you create a query package:

1. "The Partial": The first two or three chapters, or however many it takes to create a package of about thirty or forty pages. This shows that you know how to write and that the novel begins well (and believe me, that's the place where all impossible novels fail).

2. "The Outline": A present-tense synopsis, with no scenes or dialogue, of the remainder of the story, starting immediately after the end of the partial and going completely to the end of the ms. This shows that you know the whole story and that it's a good one.

3. "The Query Letter": This letter goes on top of the partial and outline, and it contains the following: "Enclosed are the first [X] chapters and a synopsis of my [hard sf/heroic fantasy/etc.] novel [Title of Manuscript]. Would you like to see the complete manuscript?" Nothing more needs to be said, unless you have sold a story or two to a professional magazine. If you have *not* sold any stories within the genre to a professional publication, then say nothing at all about your credentials or experience as a writer. They will want to get acquainted with you *after* the sale, not before reading the manuscript. You don't have to tell them you're new -- they know they've never heard of you.

Send this query package to *all* the sf publishers or fantasy publishers. Because it's a query -- i.e., you're not offering the book for sale, you're inquiring as to whether they want to see the whole manuscript -- you can query all of them at once. When the first one writes back asking to see the whole thing, wait for another week or two before sending it. If they *phone*, then they're eager -- so you send it. Otherwise, you wait to see if another publisher that you prefer asks to see it. Because when you send the complete manuscript, you send it to only one publisher at a time. Period. You *never* violate this rule without informing both publishers, and you can only do that when you're an established author and your agent is preparing for an auction.

When you get a *contract offer* -- the actual paper is sitting in front of you -- then you need an agent. Don't sign the contract. All contracts ask for rights that you and your agent can hold onto and exploit much better than the publisher can. The agent will certainly *not* be able to get you more money for your first novel, or a higher royalty rate. Forget what you've heard about those miraculous million-dollar first sales. What your new agent can do is hold onto your foreign and film rights and then work hard at selling the foreign rights. Half my income comes from foreign sales of my work.

How do you get an agent? Send a query letter to a whole bunch of reputable agents saying, "[Publisher X] has just offered me a contract for my first [science fiction/fantasy/etc.] novel, [Title]. I feel that I need representation. Would you like to see my manuscript?"

Again, this is a query, *not* a proposal. At this point, since you have already made the first sale, it is not at all unfair for you to insist on 10 percent commission, period, even though almost all agents claim 15% these days. Since that 15% is supposed to defray the costs of looking at the slushpile, and your ms. is already sold, you are in a very strong position to ask for this. See what their reaction is. You may end up going with a fifteen-percenter, or settling for 12% -- but you'll find out right away which agents regard you as their employee, or think they're going to be your manager, or are angry, testy people that you don't want to work with. Think of it this way: By seeing how they negotiate with you, you'll see how they negotiate with publishers -- their style, etc. Bully? Whiner? Liar? Or honest, forthright laying out of positions?

If you're in another genre, however, then those query packages have to go to agents, not publishers, and you have no hope of anything but 15%. When you sign with an agency, do *not* agree to a fixed term or a contract that does not specify a means of ending a relationship *immediately* upon notification. If you dismiss your agent, they are entitled to continue to collect their percentage on any contracts they negotiated; but there should be no nonsense of being stuck with an agent that you're not happy with. If you're not getting good representation, you should not have to endure it for one minute longer; if you are getting good representation, there is no reason to have a fixed term on a relationship that clearly will last for years. In every case, you are the *sole* determiner of whether you like the representation you are getting. And if you do find yourself deciding on a fixed term, make it for no longer than one year. This is essential. I have spent too much time helping too many writers get out of bad agency relationships; it is better to have no agent than a bad one.

Question 2:

I have a problem. Well, I guess it's not that big of a problem, but it sure is annoying. I can't seem to finish the stories I start. I have this problem with both short stories (but more often with) long stories. Do you have any suggestions?

-- Submitted by Anonymous

OSC Replies:

All that means is that you're starting them before you've invented them thoroughly enough. You have one idea, and you start, but that one idea is not enough to resonate deeply within you, so you can't find your way to closure because you haven't really opened.

What usually works for me is to take two idea-sources and combine them. As with a metaphor, the tension between the two ideas leads to interesting possibilities. It's a way of drawing surprising answers out of your unconscious mind.

For instance, with my story Hart's Hope, I began with a city map with intriguing (to me) street names; the idea was that depending which gate you enter through, you find a completely different city inside. I also had a completely unrelated idea of a magic system in which blood is what gives you power; living blood more than old blood, blood of higher animals more than lower, and the most power from the blood of your own child. These ideas had nothing to do with each other. But I put them together. I also threw in an idea I had been trying to develop separately, of siamese twins born joined at the face, one staring straight in at her sister, the other looking partly away, so that when they were separated, the one was completely blind and "faceless," the other only half-blind and half-faced. When I put them into Hart's Hope, I made them one of the three deities of that world (the others being "God" and "The Hart" -- the siamese twins were the "Sweet Sisters").

This has been true of story after story -- it doesn't come to life until I combine an idea with another, separately generated idea. Not all ideas can work together, but some of the combinations can be quite productive.

Then, the questions are better, the dilemmas more provocative, and you reach far deeper inside yourself. The closure, when it comes, is satisfying. Voila. The ending. Ending problems are almost always solved by fixing the opening.

-- 29 January 1999

Lesson #7

On Plagiarism, Borrowing, Resemblance, and Influence

Plagiarism can be looked at two ways, as a legal matter (copyright infringement) or an ethical matter (borrowing too heavily from an unattributed source, even if it doesn't break the law).

Copyright Infringement

While I'm not a lawyer, I can tell you the understanding that I have: Unless it can be shown that a work uses about a third of the written language of the source, or closely paraphrases it for many long passages, there is nothing actionable under the law. Ideas can't be copyrighted, nor can titles (titles can only be trademarked, and then only if you're using them for merchandising, and even then only if it's not a common word).

Unethical Copying

This is what most people mean when they say "plagiarism." If you write a manuscript that, point for point, follows an unattributed source, and you try to pass it off as original work, you have probably crossed the line into unethical copying. The punishment is not legal prosecution (though in the film business you can sue for a portion or even the entirety of earnings, if the copy gets filmed and the original therefore can't), but rather the scorn of the publishing industry. In several famous cases, the punishment for this kind of copying was public exposure, public humiliation, and in the case of novice writers, the end of all hope of getting published (at least under the name you were using!). Publishers have long memories when it comes to such offenses.

Working with Sources

Copyright infringement and unethical copying are not only rare, it is almost impossible to inadvertently commit such an offense (the lame defense of a certain romance writer to the contrary notwithstanding). There are many different kinds of sources, and many ways one work can resemble another. So let's consider some of the possible sources of stories, and see what the rules are.

Just the facts.

You can't copyright facts. You can only copyright the language used to recount those facts. (That's why mapmakers and phone directory publishers insert false data - in order to prove that catch someone else copying instead of doing their own original research.) And when you base a story on a factual source, like history, you can change it any way you want - legally, that is. Ethically, I think you need to take some care for the sake of your readers and for the sake of the reputations of other people - even the dead. When your story is at a far remove from the original facts, then you can do what you want. If you base a character on a real person, as I did in basing some of Alvin's life on incidents from the life of Joseph Smith, or even base a story point for point on a historical source, as I did in basing the plot of the Homecoming series on the first portion of the Book of Mormon, as long as you make drastic changes you are perfectly safe - drastic enough changes make it so the reader does not expect to be getting the facts straight.

Still, I feel a sense of responsibility toward the facts. For instance, because I believe the Book of

Mormon to be what it purports to be - a modern translation of a genuine ancient document, created under divine direction - I felt a great responsibility in adapting it to a new setting, even though I knew few readers would get the connection. Therefore I bound myself strictly by the moral stance of the original - the good guys remain good, the bad guys remain bad, and whenever the original source ascribed a motive to someone for their actions, I stuck to the motive given by the book. Likewise, even though I depart widely from Joseph Smith's life in the Alvin Maker stories, I nevertheless try to remain true to his personality and character as I have come to understand him through research - I don't ever have Alvin do anything that is more morally questionable than things Joseph Smith actually did, and insofar as possible, I make his motives gibe with Joseph Smith's motives.

There are writers who feel no such compunction, of course. Practically everyone who does a story about the life of Jesus these days seems to feel obliged to make Judas the misunderstood hero, for instance. I think that's juvenile and cheap, but that's a review, not an ethical charge. Oliver Stone crossed the line much farther, I think, with his film JFK. Better researchers than I have eviscerated his mistreatment of history, so let me merely say that as I understand it, Stone took enormous liberties with the story he was telling and especially with some of the real people he portrayed. For instance, one man who denied to his deathbed that he had anything to do with or knew anything about any plot to assassinate Kennedy, Stone shows confessing. This is a lie, right? Stone knew the man never confessed, and yet he showed him confessing. Now, if Stone had distanced his material from the source story as I did with Homecoming or the Alvin Maker stories, he could do that with impunity (though I don't). However, in JFK he left everyone in their original setting, and he haunted every talk show spouting off about how he was finally getting the truth out where the American people could see it. Later, when he was called on his misdeeds, he whined that it was "just a movie" and "fiction." In a country that keeps Clinton as president, I guess he can have it both ways. Everybody has to draw the line where they feel right about it.

Slander and Libel.

When you're dealing with real people, of course, another issue comes up that is quite different from plagiarism. Slander and libel both consist of false and damaging statements about a person (slander is spoken, libel is printed). In court, there are additional tests - if a person is famous, in order to prove he was libeled or slandered he has to prove that the person who lied about him did so with malicious intent or with reckless disregard for whether the charges were true or not. This standard is hard to prove, since it goes to motive. (In other countries, no such standard has to be met - even famous people have a right to insist that people not lie about them.)

There are certain protections for a writer dealing with real people. First, you can't libel the dead. That is, once a person has died, no one has standing to sue on their behalf, and that's why Stone could get away with lying about that one dead guy. Second, truthfulness is a complete defense - if you can prove that your charges are true, there is no libel. Third, you can hide behind your sources - if you rely on a seemingly reputable source that turns out to be inaccurate, chances are you'll get away with a retraction, an apology, and a correction. Fourth, if you disguise the details about the person so thoroughly that most people would not know whom the character was based on, and the only thing that made the person identifiable was that he sued you, he'll be hard-pressed to show how your story, as it stood, damaged him.

But the best way to avoid such problems is obvious: Don't base your fictional characters on living persons. In those rare cases when you must openly base your story on a real incident or person, get permission in writing and, if possible, involve them in the process. Thank them graciously in your acknowledgments, and make an honest effort to be fair. But then, if you're doing that, why make it

fictional?

Necessary Resemblance.

When you are going to original sources that are not factual, chances are very good that you're going to come up with elements in your story that resemble elements in stories by other people who went to the same sources. What could be more obvious and innocent? For instance, in the Alvin Maker series, I arranged for some research into American folk beliefs and practices, and used them in my fiction. But anyone else who wanted to use American folk beliefs (or European folk beliefs that were the source, in turn, of American folk beliefs) might very well come across the same elements I used. There is no problem at all with incorporating such elements into your work. The resemblance is unavoidable, and it harms neither party.

Sometimes, though, another work of fiction is your source. For instance, when writing a parody (like Pat Murphy's recent sci-fi retelling of The Hobbit), you can freely follow the storyline of the original - as long as it's clear that parody is your purpose. Sometimes you can be too faithful to the original - a flaw I think Murphy's novel suffers from - but the result is not charges of plagiarism, but merely disappointment and bad reviews. But no one watching Mel Brooks's Spaceballs would dream of charging him with plagiarism or unethical copying - though few would charge him with being very funny, either ...

Derivative?

What if, however, your "research" consists of reading another work of fiction and then "thinking up your own." I'll confess that when I first picked up Sword of Shannara, eons ago, I quickly decided that Brooks's only source was Lord of the Rings, and I put it back down. But this was not a charge that Brooks plagiarized or copied unethically. Rather I simply detected way too much influence, and not enough original vision for my tastes. That is, Brooks did nothing unethical. He simply did something that I found artistically displeasing. Millions of readers disagree with me, and I confess that since that time I've seen many works published that have far less original content than Sword of Shannara did, so I daresay my original judgment was unfair. Still, when you work within a genre utterly dominated - arguably created - by one towering writer, you're going to run the risk of being called "derivative."

However, keep in mind that as far as we know, Shakespeare almost never wrote a story "from scratch." His sources were usually historical, and often were stories that had been depicted in plays by other playwrights. Originality was much less a concern in that era - indeed, it was regarded as a plus if you could point to an admired source for your work.

And you also have to be aware of the fact that your audience's sophistication will affect the way they receive such resemblances. If the only science fiction novel you have read is Starship Troopers and then you read Ender's Game, you're going to go ape over the fact that there are insectoid aliens, etc. Card is a thief! But then when you realize (1) Card has never read Starship Troopers and (2) there was a long history of sci-fi stories about combat with insectoid aliens that both Heinlein and Card borrowed from, you relax a little. We weren't being "derivative," we were "working within a tradition."

The Anxiety of Influence

Influence happens. It's unavoidable. Indeed, many an English teacher acts as if the only reason to study literature is to detect influences.

The problem is that real influence is (or should be) unconscious. That is, because you have read certain writers whose stories have been thoroughly absorbed into your memory, you will unconsciously borrow motifs and ideas from those pivotal works without even realizing you're doing it. (For instance, my story "Unaccompanied Sonata" spewed out fully formed; only later - years later - did I realize how much my story owed to Lloyd Biggle Jr.'s "Tunesmith," which I read when I was eight or nine years old and had long since forgotten.)

Some novice writers, having absorbed utterly wrong lessons about what makes good writing, try to be "influenced" by writers they admire. This is not influence, however - it is borrowing. And it's legitimate, though it is customary to acknowledge your conscious borrowings - the way I acknowledged my debt to Ursula K. LeGuin by using her word, ansible, for the instantaneous communication device in the Ender books. I didn't have to do that, however - I only did it because I was so naive when writing "Ender's Game" (the original novelet) that I did not realize that instantaneous communication in a universe with lightspeed travel was a common motif. As far as I knew, I was getting it from her, so I tipped my hat to her. In no other respect, however, does Ender's Game resemble any of the Hainish novels.

Many writers, however, far from borrowing or seeking to be "influenced," are desperately afraid of inadvertent influence to the point of paranoia. Since every good idea has already been used, getting too anxious about such chance resemblances is a waste of time.

Here's my rule: Any idea you really like that absolutely works for your story is your idea, no matter who else might have used it before. The only limitation on this is what the audience will stand for - if you end your novel with the hero standing before a fire and the only way the ring gets thrown in is because someone else bites off his finger and then falls in, well, your audience is likely to be a bit disgusted - the resemblance is too close, the source way too well-known. Only if your intent is humorous can you get away with it.

You should not be penalized for having read widely, however. If your story has elements that you recognize as being similar to a book by someone else, so what? As long as it's your own story, and those motifs feel important and true within the context of your work, they're your ideas now. If you think the resemblance is close enough and the other work well known enough that you want to acknowledge the resemblance, go ahead - it costs nothing to add a line to your Acknowledgments section, or even to slip a sly acknowledgment into the text of the story. (I tipped my hat to Tolkien for the debt that all fantasists owe to him by having a character - was it Alvin? - dream a dream that was obviously a scene from Lord of the Rings. I meant it as a joke between me and my readers, but some have unfortunately sought to reconcile the two works as if I were asserting that they take place in the same fictional universe. I was not.)

Does Crais owe Parker a royalty for having a violent sidekick to come in and do his hero's dirty work? Not at all. It's an extremely useful device, and Crais has made the characters real and definitely his own. And will someone who has a character involved in midwifery who foretells the future of the babies who are born owe anything to me because I have such a character in the Alvin Maker series? Not at all. I'd be flattered to death to think that my work might actually influence somebody else. And I appreciate the care that this writer has taken to make sure no lines have been crossed. Sounds to me like you've followed all the rules. So finish the book and publish it!

-- 20 December 1999

Lesson #8

The "Maguffin"

Question:

As I recently read Ender's Game, I got to thinking about what the *draw* of the story was for me. What I liked. And I discovered that I didn't care much about the Buggers, or the war. What really interested me was Ender and his struggles to grow despite the injustice of his situation. I got to thinking about your Alvin series, and I found the same thing applied. I don't care about the Crystal City. I'm glad it's there, because I know all this means something, but I really don't care about it. I care about Alvin, and Peggy, and Arthur, etc, and how they are getting along in the world.

What I'm wondering is, two things: From the feedback you get from others concerning these novels, is my reaction typical? Do most people really identify with Ender's problems growing up, and facing injustice and so forth, (same with Alvin). And secondly, are *you* aware of that as you write your stories.

As I learn so much about writing, I find that while the overall question is important, it's the characters struggle against injustice that gets me really hooked. Like I said, I wasn't too worried or concerned about the Buggers, nor was I worried or concerned about the Crystal City. Yet one novel you've written I can think of I was concerned with the Uber Question, which was Speaker for the Dead. While I loved the characters in that story (particularly Ender) I was also just as hooked by the Descolada Virus and very drawn by the Piggies themselves. I couldn't wait to meet the females, and I was on the edge of my seat when I finally got to find out why they 'planted' people. In that book I *was* concerned with the ending question concerning the Piggies. Yet I wasn't as much in any of The Alvin series or the Ender book.

The reason I'm exploring this is that I'm investigating what really makes a book interesting to people. And good characters are part of it, as are a good story, but it seems the pattern that is emerging from most real good fiction is this: Overall big picture story, question, event, milieu etc. Then you take interesting characters and give them problems, most notably problems of injustice, manipulation, and fairness (these seem to resonate with most people and generate sympathy and interesting far more than simply putting your character in physical jeopardy). Then eventually you solve the end problem (Ender Beats the Buggers). But what sticks in our heads is not that our characters won, but their struggles in life getting there. We bond with Ender not because he beat the buggers, but because he struggled against bullies and unjust manipulative teachers in the battle school. That's where we love him. Or Alvin struggles against Makepeace, and Arthur against prejudice, etc. It's not the end we are so concerned about, and yet it has to be there. It's like your MICE quotient for the overall story, yet what matters is the individual person's struggle. In other words it's the journey that is so important.

Maybe that's why so many fantasy and science fiction stories are based around the concept of a quest or a trek somewhere.

-- Jason F. Smith

OSC Replies:

You've just run into what Hitchcock called "the maguffin" -- the issue that the characters care about, but the audience does not necessarily care so much about. Alvin cares about the Crystal City, Ender and

Bean about the alien invasion, etc., but the readers should care about Alvin and Ender and Bean. In short, your response tells me that the novels are working.

This is, by the way, how we all get around the central problem of fiction: We ask readers to pay money and spend time and invest their emotions in stories about people who do not exist. We must somehow, since we cannot make them real, make these characters *matter*. And what we do to accomplish this is give them an intense and understandable desire or ambition or need. The audience does not share the need, but comprehends it and cares about the character. We do not even care, necessarily, if the character achieves the ambition (certainly in My Best Friend's Wedding, we were all hoping the heroine would fail!) -- what we care about is that this character be happy, or at least feel this his or her life has been worth living. We care about moral issues, nobility, decency, happiness, goodness -- the issues that matter in the real world, but which can only be addressed, in their purity, in fiction. Since there is no Crystal City, and for that matter no Alvin Maker, it hardly matters whether it is built or not. But if he dies for it, we will shed tears -- for his death, not for the Crystal City.

This is why I have been puzzled when readers ask for (and sometimes demand!) another book after Children of the Mind. The question of whether the planet of the Descoladores is raman or varelse just didn't matter to me, as a writer -- the planet doesn't exist, so who cares *which* it turns out to be? What matters is the discussion the characters had, the decision they had to make that IF the planet was varelse, *then* they would have the right to destroy it in order for our own species to be safe. *Than* issue was, to my mind at least, fully resolved. But ... sometimes the maguffin can be a bit oversold ... my fault if it was.

The reason that you stayed involved with the resolution of Speaker for the Dead is that the question of the pequeninos' nature was not a maguffin at all. Speaker, while people take it for a character novel (and it does function on that level), is really structured as a mystery: Why did Pipo -- and then Libo -- die? Why did the pequeninos kill them in such a gruesome manner? What's it all about, Rooter? And so the story could not resolve until that question was answered. That's built into the structure. The first actual maguffin of the Speaker trilogy is the issue of whether Lusitania will be destroyed by the M.D. device; the second is the issue of the Descoladores as raman or varelse. They overlap, but as with any good maguffin, the resolution of the maguffin, when it happens, is not all that awfully important compared to the resolution of the characters' stories.

The questions that matter are the moral questions -- what is noble? What is good? What is right? What is fair? (often these have contradictory answers in the same story -- especially if it's a story by me <grin>) -- and the causal questions -- why do people do what they do? Why does the universe work the way it works? And the reason these matter to us is that they are the issues that we must resolve in our own minds in order to make sense of the world and live within it. We not only must know how people behave, but how they should behave, and most especially how *we* should behave; what goodness is, so we'll know when we've achieved it; what nobility is, so we'll know whom to honor; etc. The issues of causality are inextricably connected with the moral issues, too: If I cause a thing, then I am responsible for it; but if I was caused by something else to do that thing, than I am less responsible, and the thing that made me act in such a way is also or entirely to blame. When normative stories come from religion, fiction is less necessary; we get our mythic framework from the stories of the public religion (which usually includes patriotism as well as theology and ritual). But when, as in our society, public religion has been denigrated, debased, and/or replaced by weak substitutes, fiction remains as a source of moral and causal truth (i.e., stories so believed that they are acted upon). We are so hungry for this that we will share stories even when we're dying, not as an escape to "take our minds off it," but as a palliative, to make life make sense, to make sacrifice worthwhile, to make loss bearable, to make happiness recognizable.

-- 26 April 2000

Lesson #9

Plotlines and Ideas

Question:

I am currently working on a novel with a very disjointed plotline, and I was wondering if you could pick out some 'red flags' I should look out for in flow and structure. Problems I am already trying to surmount include the fact that the five main characters do not know each other until the end of the book. Their stories occur on five different timelines which means that each chapter marks a shift forwards or backwards several years.

They interrelate because the story opens with an event, a legal ruling, and the stories are about how it affects the characters and causes them to find each other and bring an appeal. Friends reading the rough draft don't seem to have a problem with the disjointedness, but because they are friends and people who actually choose to read amateur science fiction in their non-existent free time (which shows somewhat questionable judgment!), I take their comments with a grain of salt.

-- Emily Mah

OSC Replies:

It seems to me that you're already aware of the cost that a disconnected set of plotlines can have, and that you're already compensating for that. So your friends are right, to a degree.

The problem with the structure you're using is

1. It calls attention to itself, drawing the reader out of the stories.

2. All the storylines have to be very interesting; if even one lags, it weakens the whole thing.

3. The reader is asked for a *great* deal of patience, since the reader will expect the characters to meet.

The compensations you're probably already using are: to make sure *all* the storylines are full of dramatic tension; To make the characters come *close* to meeting at several points throughout the story, or to have "degree of separation" involvement. That is, one drops a paper that has some words or a drawing on it; another character (from another storyline) picks up that paper and it causes him/her to go off on a train of thought that leads him/her to make a decision. That sort of thing. Near misses and indirect connections like that will make the reader feel little satisfactions along the way, before the big meeting at the end, and will help key up the reader's anticipation.

The only real rule is: You can break any rule, as long as you're willing to pay the price. The intricacy of the plot you've chosen for your first novel is a hard one to work with, but if you bring it off, it makes your novel all the more memorable and likely to make a splash. A gamble -- but potentially well worth it. Good luck!

Question:

I would like to know what you think about all day long and where these stories are coming from, if you don't mind answering this for me.

You see, I once wanted to be a writer but I had nothing to write. I have some very dark poetry that I wrote all throughout jr high and high school. It seems that I write in riddles better than anything else, and only when I'm extremely frustrated and/or depressed.

I was just wondering where you get the determination and discipline to spew out all these stories.

-- Anonymous

OSC Replies

Story ideas are happening around you all the time. But the storyteller has to look at events and scenes with a questioning mind. Why did this happen? Why else might it happen? What could be the result of this? What else? Things are this way now; how else *might* they be? What if this changed? What if that?

Without those questions (all of them about causation, by the way), there would be no stories; the scientist and historian and journalist generally try to come up with stories that fit the fact; the fiction writer alters the facts to fit the story that "feels right."

Wanting to "be a writer" never gets anyone anywhere. The only thing that works is actually wanting to write and then doing it!

-- 26 April 2000

Lesson #10

The following correspondence is used with permission from Jason F. Smith. It includes a letter to Mr. Card, OSC's answer, Smith's follow-up letter and Card's follow-up answer.

Letter:

I'm writing to ask your professional opinion on the ideal fantasy novel length for a first time author. I've been told that the overall length of a novel should be between 75,000 and 100,000 words. However, it appears that most fantasy novels are larger (witness the Jordan and Goodkind novels.) Terry Goodkind's first novel (Wizard's First Rule) was huge, around 250,000 words in length. But I've been told to avoid that route. Since I'm writing a series, I have some leeway where I can end the novel.

All things being equal (assuming I have a good story with fresh ideas, characters, and conflicts) which size manuscript gives me the best chance of getting an agent or editor's attention? What are the publisher's looking for right now, what sells the best?

Personally I like to buy bigger novels. I feel like I'm getting my money's worth. But the counterpoint is that bigger novels are intimidating and fewer people will buy them. Plus of course paper costs a lot of money these days.

OSC Replies:

There are two main concerns in determining the length of a single volume of a multi-volume work. First, what does the work itself require? While there have been series books that make no attempt at closure, merely stopping the story when a certain number of pages has been reached, most series authors find that they - and their readers - are more satisfied if some major plot threads are resolved near the end of each volume. In a series, there will of course be main plot threads that are not resolved -- that may, in fact, be in something of a cliffhanger situation. But readers will be unsatisfied if there is no closure, and flat out angry if there is only a cliffhanger and no resolution of any kind.

So in determining the length of individual volumes in a fantasy series, you must keep in mind the shape of the series as a whole, and where the major climactic closure points will come. You won't necessarily write one volume per major climax -- in books as thick as fantasy novels tend to be these days, you'll probably have quite a few good solid resolutions-of-tension. But you choose one of these, an important one, to be the major climax of the volume, and shape the structure accordingly. (If a couple of other climaxes can be timed to come near the same point in the story, so much the better.) The result is that even though the reader knows this is only book two of five or one of three, the reader still closes the book saying, "Wow, that was great. I can't wait for the next one." This is so much better than when the reader closes the book saying, "That was *it*? I have to wait for the next book to find out *anything*?" Guess which reader will be telling his friends about your series, or lending it out, or checking at Borders or Amazon or B&N to find out when the next volume is due.

Once you know the closure points you're aiming at, then you have to get a sense of the pace you want to set. There's "soap opera" pace, where things happen so incrementally, with so much angst every step of the way, and with endless scenes where characters who were not present at key events have those events recounted to them by characters who WERE there, etc. Frankly, this pacing makes me want to find the

author and delete his files. There's action-adventure pace, where you move lickety-split through the events, chewing up plot like a sumo wrestler going through a stack of sandwiches. And there are many paces in between. I tend to be a little more leisurely, giving a lot of the characters' personal reactions to events and their plans and ideas about what to do next. I spend a lot of time on relationships. However, I give almost no time at all to description or writerly writing, so on the whole I move through the plotline rather quickly. (This is why abridgements of my books for audio presentation almost always result in some serious incoherency -- I don't include very much that can afford to be cut.)

Which brings us to the second concern: What length will the audience bear? Note that we're not talking about making story decisions based on what the audience wants -- the myth that you can simply insert sex and violence to beef up sales. The story decisions are either already made, or won't get made until the time of writing. We're talking about pacing decisions.

When you have several novels behind you, you have the experience of writing at length and you know how the length of a book is shaping up. But on your first novel-length work, especially when it's going to be a series, you simply don't know. So on your first novel, I recommend giving no thought at all to foolish rules like "the audience doesn't want such a thick book" or "big thick fantasies are in." What's "in" are stories that readers understand, care about, and believe in -- provide that in one hundred pages and they'll buy a thin book; provide it in 10,000 pages, and your name is Robert Jordan <grin>. So, having divided the overall story into coherent volumes, write each volume according to what feels right to you at the time. After that first volume, you'll say to yourself, Oh, I guess I write 800-age tomes ... or, Hmm, apparently my volumes are going to be about 70,000 words.

Having said that, I must point out that the original advice you were given -- that a book feels like a normal novel somewhere around 100,000 words and is hard to publish at less than 75,000 -- is true. This means that if you find your first volume stacking up at about 60,000 words, you need to go back and re-pace it -- you're consuming plot *way* too fast. (No, you don't need to add more plot. But you might want to beef up a side-story, adding chapters that follow other characters on related adventures.)

However, there is a weird story-dilation effect that I've noticed. At about 25,000 words, I start thinking this novel will never end -- I'm barely started and I've got all these pages! That feeling persists up to 50,000 words. But then, along about 75,000 words, I start getting a real anxiety that I'm suddenly moving so quickly that this novel won't get even to 90,000. Then, at about 100,000 words, I realize that I'm not done yet so I have nothing to worry about. And at 108,000 or 112,000, I'm done. Sometimes, of course, it doesn't happen that way -- Seventh Son was shorter, Saints was longer, Xenocide was longer. But generally speaking, at the pace I tend to use, and with the sense I have developed of how much story makes a book, my novels hover between 100,000 and 110,000 words. But that's me -- it's what I'm comfortable with. If you find that to tell the story in a way that feels comfortable and natural to you, you tend to clock 180,000 or 250,000 words, then that's the way it is -- that's the length you'll submit to the publisher. If the story is good, they won't balk at that length. Too many thick books have sold too well for a publisher to say something dumb like "thick fantasy series novels don't sell."

I guess what it boils down to is: Until you've written some novels, you don't know what it feels like to write novels, so you can't make decisions about length. Nor can you trust your feelings along the way, since at times it will feel as if the book will never end and other times as if you'll never be able to stretch it out long enough to make a book out of it. And length does not really depend on the plotting. It depends on the pacing.

Follow-up Letter:

Okay, your last response on Novel Length opened the door on a new question.

I'm writing to ask you about pacing, with specific examples in mind. You suggest to lengthen a book you should lengthen your pacing, *not* your plot.

1. The specific problem I have had is when a writer sets up a quest, and then enters into a series of try fail cycles. The quest is linear. There are no left or right. No 'turn's in the story. Just more and more problems. This kind of pacing bogs me down, because what I really want to know is whether he gets the quest or not. It's not the journey that becomes important to me, but the achieving the aim. The journey is just boring, because I know he's going to get there eventually. I just want to know what happens when he does.

2. I have a character who is on a boat heading to the site of the major conflict. In my mind, the reader wants him to get there. Any kind of problem along the way is going to bore them, because what they really want to see is him getting there and entering the confrontation. But.... The ship trip is 2 months like, and meanwhile all the other characters are doing things. He's got nothing to do. Do I drop him and wait till he gets there (a long piece in the manuscript) or do I start creating artificial problems for him.

I know part of your answer has to be that if you make your character interesting and real enough, reader's will want to be with him on the journey. Is that the final answer? I can live with that. That's a challenge to do but I can try. Or is there another answer in addition to it?

3. The concept of picking up the pace is heavily addressed in a lot of books. But what about slowing it down . . . while making it interesting. For instance I read that Mario Puzo in The Godfather put in the whole part about Johnny Fontane and the girl Lucy, just to slow the pace down from the frenetic happenings in the Corleone family. That's fine, I'll do that too, but the key is to make that side portion *interesting*, without giving the reader the idea that you are just delaying by creating an artificial tension.

Thanks again. For reference the two places I felt there incredible artificial tension were the books The One Tree by Stephen R. Donaldson (talk about a crappy ending that pissed me off) and the third book of Robin Hobb's Assassin Series (Assassin's Quest). She had a first person account from the point of view of the Hero. He had to find his lost King Verity in the mountains to help him solve the mystery of the statue dragons. Well . . . the whole book was his quest to get there. I was bored out of my skull. Not that he didn't have good challenges, or problems, it's just that I wanted to know the answer of the mystery, and *I knew ht got there*, because she framed the story as a history told by the character in first person. Meaning that he survived, etc.

So . . . how do you lengthen pace without giving the read the feeling you're just messing with him or her?

OSC Replies:

The problem you're facing is the direct-line problem. The try-fail cycle you talk about not only is boring, it isn't used very much in epics that work. Rather you have the conflicting objectives cycle. Things that are worth doing, that *need* doing, which sidetrack the characters and distract them from their quest. Then there's the This Can't Happen trick (Gandalf *dies*?) that "changes everything" and causes the group to reconfigure (again, some of them being distracted as they go off on sub-quests).

Also, you need characters who are *not* equally committed to the main quest (think Boromir) or who have other quests that only they can perform (think Aragorn).

Then you have the protagonist's conflicting feelings about having undertaken the quest in the first place, and about putting other people's lives at risk. (I'll go off by myself, says Frodo, because this way I'm only bringing destruction down on my friends. [Actually, this was deeply stupid, since the friends were his main hope of avoiding being killed by the ring-wraiths; but Tolkien made it all come out anyway <grin>].)

But sometimes the sidetracks don't work -- think of Tom Bombadil and the whole barrow-wight sequence in the first volume of LOTR. All very lovely, but it does *nothing* to advance the story (i.e., to make us care more or worry more about the characters; nothing arises out of who they are, and no one is transformed).

So you need to make sure that the conflicting desires of the characters make sense -- that each of the characters matters to us, positively or negatively, in his own right. Then the whole try-fail cycle disappears. That's a videogame, not a novel <grin>.

Follow-up Letter #2:

Your advice has caused an explosion in me. It started with the novel length question, which you answered in terms of pacing, which led me to ask about the try fail cycle, which you rejected and threw me into a chaos of panic. But you came back in mentioned that the 'real story' comes from the conflict within the character. That triggered my memory of Ben Bova's Emotion vs. Emotion advice, which in turn triggered my memory of my brief study of Danielle Steel (410 million copies sold) where every single one of her characters has a duel desire (Betty loves both Fred and Parker). Then Friday night I read in Elia Kazan's A Life autobiography that the secret of all stories is to have a character in conflict with himself. Back to Bova, I read the next morning that you start with the character, creating the conflicting emotion, and then give him a problem that directly impacts that conflict.

And just like that I finally understood what you meant when you said Try Fail vs. Real Story. I mean, it hit me like a ton of bricks! I applied it immediately to three of my characters and I can't tell you how excited I am. I was jumping on the bed causing my wife to growl. I couldn't stop talking. You connected with me, you led me where I needed to go? Why? The Proof: For the first time in my life, my characters are *alive* to *me*! I felt sadness and regret for them, and worry. That mysterious connection I've always missed.

And you are right, I'm going to have to rewrite the entire thing. Not that the plot has to change much, but you are totally right! I need to rewrite it! And it wasn't a waste, because it got me to this point!!!

Then, another piece of the puzzle came this morning: I'm driving to work and I remember Abraham and Issac. And I think: Obedience to God Vs. Love for his Child. But it was even worse than that. Abraham wanted kids his whole life. No kids. He prayed, and no answer, and then it was too late. But a miracle happened, and he got a kid when he was old! Not only that, he was promised generations and generations, a very important thing to the old Jewish Culture. He was thrilled. And then God asked him to kill his son.

Wow! Not only is there conflicting desires in Abraham, but his problem is the *worst possible thing it*

could be. Hugh Nibley teaches in his collection of Essays Volume 12 Temple and Cosmos, that every single person will have to be faced with their Issacc. Whatever it is, God will come, and ask you for it, and see if you aren't willing to give it. It's the test of this life.

And I applied that to my characters, and it's haunting. It's terrible. It's sad. I think of Ender, and his duel desire for love and belonging vs. helping the world. And I felt so bad for him, because he couldn't have both. Ah!!!!!

Do you see how this is impacting me?

I've written about 10 pages of material asking your questions, but I've distilled it all to this exciting letter. I have three things to end with:

1. Thanks so much for helping me. I don't know if you realize the impact and the energy you provided me. Amazing. I am so grateful you were finally able to make the connection to me. Thank you.

2. I want to ask you to do something, and I offer to participate. You need to bring this inner conflict concept to your readers on the web. This is what you were talking about all this time, with the Maguffin and everything, and you have to put it on there! Writer's need to understand this. This is the key to it all! Some kind of lesson with questions and answers needs to be done. I really believe this and want to share it with others.

3. How do we do this. I'm talking *craft* questions, nuts and bolts. Scenes, narrative summary, dialogue, inner dialogue. We need the Tools, bags of tricks, how to, stuff on this.

Thanks so much again!!!! This is an exciting time to write!

OSC Replies:

I'm delighted to know that you've made this breakthrough -- I know how it feels when you suddenly realize what your story needs.

But don't make the mistake of thinking that the things you're so excited about came from me. As your own letter indicates, these concepts were always there waiting for you. What happened was not that I gave you a key, but rather that you finally found the lock for a key you'd had for a long time, or rather you finally realized that *this* key went with *this* lock. I'm glad to have been part of that moment for you -- but it is the writer's readiness that determines when the lesson will be learned.

When I teach writing workshops, some of my students get most of it, most get a lot of it, and all get at least some of it. But I can always see that only a handful are really ready to put what they've learned to work. Some of them don't reach that point till years later -- *then* they finally understand things they thought they understood all along. It's that connection between knowing and doing that's always so hard to predict or produce in someone else.

So, while I'm happy to know that my name is linked in your mind with such an important breakthrough, I can assure you that the credit for the improvement in your work and the greater joy you will now take in writing belongs to you. You got yourself to this point, and you will move forward from here -- and would have done so without me. This is not false modesty -- this is an important point. Because when you need

your next breakthrough, you shouldn't look to me or any other writing teacher. You should look (as writers should always look) at *everything* around you, because you never know what the trigger will be; and you should never look to anyone as a mentor, because the person who helped you once will probably never have what you need at the right time again. Post hoc ergo propter hoc is a fallacy -- I am no more than a pair of lucky socks. <grin>

-- 2 August 2000

Lesson #11

Digital Books

Question:

Is the ability to copy books digitally going to be the death of copyright, as some are saying? Will ebooks replace print books?

-- Anonymous

OSC Replies:

I don't see it as a problem in publishing. People have been able to get downloads of manuscripts or copy them in other ways for years. But even the people who download them still want the book. There is no electronic reader that is adequate and no model for electronic readers that does not have serious conceptual flaws even if the technical ones are eventually solved. People will still want to own the book. Maybe these are "famous last words," and you can't underestimate the capacity of industries to destroy themselves -- for instance, by prematurely stopping the publication of print books! <grin> But whereas cds were instantly seen, correctly, as a vast improvement over vinyl, ebooks are much more analogous to digital audio tape, which, having been crippled so it could not copy cds, was, in effect, useless to the consumer, and therefore had no effect on regular cassettes. Ebooks are in no way an improvement over print books, to the consumer. And right now, the stupid way the industry is approaching them, they aren't an improvement for the industry or the authors, either.

As for the issue of friends sharing with friends -- they do it already, with printed books. It's called "lending." I have many, many people proudly tell me, "That copy of Ender's Game has been read by fifteen people" or some other such number. Some authors retort, "They should have bought their own," but I'm perfectly happy. Every lent copy is a chance to have another reader eagerly waiting to *buy* my latest book.

Remember that the same flap occurred over radio broadcasting of records. "Why will they buy the record when they can hear the song on the radio for free?" demanded the record industry as they tried to bar the playing of records on the radio. The answer: In actual fact, radio play of records helped raise record sales to fantastic high levels. There's every reason to think that easy digital access to manuscripts would *increase* the sales of traditional books, as readers could try before they buy.

Think of how many people buy videotapes and then *don't watch them*. (Renting is different.) They buy them because they enjoyed the movie and want to own it in their library. People do the same things with books. They buy a copy of a book because, having read a friend's copy, they want that book in their library. They don't necessarily reread it -- they just want to have it.

In short, I just don't think that publishing is going to be affected negatively by digital copying. That's why I used to make my manuscripts available online for free during the months between my writing the books and their publication. There were sometimes hundreds of downloads -- but as far as we know, most or all of the people who downloaded it went on to buy the book when it came out in print -- and during the months when the book was only available online, those who read those advance copies were helping sell the book when it did appear by talking about it with their friends!

Follow-up Question:

Yes. Interesting. Especially the bit about stimulating the interest to buy. I hadn't thought of that. It's like the dude in the mall holding his basket of buttery bits of monster pretzels. It all revolves around the fact that right now there isn't any good substitute for a book -- readability, access, portability. And it takes equipment and dough to make a cheap book and distribute it. It's fairly difficult to enter this part of the industry. So that's the control point on this supply chain. You're able to cash in because of that point.

I guess the problem, or perhaps the question is, will they come up with a good electronic substitute for a book? Because when/if that happens novelists have no control point. Not unless they create another one.

Follow-up Answer:

The truth is, there *is* no idea that really replaces a printed book. No matter how they solve the screen problem, they can't get rid of the transience problem -- electronic texts are erasable. When they disappear, they're gone. When the technology changes, they're unreadable. In a power outage or when the batteries die, you have no book. If you lose the reading machine, you can't read any of your books, whereas if you lose one book, you still have the others. These problems can't be "solved," they're intrinsic -- for precisely the same reason that vinyl records could never be installed in cars the way radios could. It's inherent in the technology.

As to authors getting paid, the real problem in the book distribution system is not the lack of a choke point for paying authors -- in fact, right now the real scandal is that online book distributors have the gall to offer authors royalties down in the ten to fifteen percent range, or even fifty percent, when based on the risk-and-expenses ratio, the authors should be getting more like 85% or 90% royalties. It's a scam and a grab by publishers, and authors have got to put a stop to it right now.

The real choke point even if we had an all electronic distribution system for books is not based around encryption or other annoying nonsense, it's based around selection and editing. There are hundreds of thousands of authors out there with books and stories and poems to sell. How will readers possibly be able to sift through this monstrous pile of (mostly) drivel in order to find the good stuff?

Editors are going to catch on that the public needs editors as much as it needs writers, not so the editors can help the writers "fix" their books, but so that the audience can rely upon the editors to help them *find* the *good* books! In a world of ebooks, what we don't need are publishers (though in fact the "publisher," instead of being the financial risk-taker involved in printing books, would become the managerial leader of groups of editors, handling the finances, etc.). And so the money will come, as it comes with magazines, not through access to the text, but through access to the website.

My model for how this can and should work is:

Editors set up "bookshelves" or "booksites" where they provide exclusive access to books (and poems and stories) they have selected and which they guarantee will deliver a high standard of quality. They are able to compete with print publication because they have enabled "microcharging" - the ability to charge mere fractions of a dollar for particular downloads. Some of these editors may also charge access fees -- monthly or per visit -- simply for access to the site, but again, these will be microcharges -- less than a dollar per visit or only a couple of bucks a month. Of the download charges, 90% goes to the author.

So if a booksite is the only place where you can download the latest Grisham novel, you might pay, for this high-demand book, $2.00. Of this, $1.70 would go to Grisham. Since you pay for your own paper and laser toner to get a printout, that's fair. And since the cost is so low, you feel no qualms about telling your friends, "it's practically free, download it yourself!" The latest book by Card, however, will cost only a buck, of which I get 85 cents. Fair, because there's less demand. If I don't like it, I can go to a booksite where the editor plans to charge $1.50 for my books. But it won't be price alone. In order to get my books offered on a fantastically popular booksite like Beth Meacham's would be, I have to let her keep 20% of the "cover price" instead of the 10% that less-popular editors are able to charge - but we make up for that "loss" to me by raising my cover price to John Grisham's $2.00, because Beth's customers are willing to pay that much for books *she* has certified as excellent.

Poems can be accessed for a dime, short stories for a quarter. And so on. Microcharges make the whole thing possible. And editorial judgment is what makes the each booksite work.

The only reason this isn't happening right now is that there isn't enough money in the web for firstrate editors to be willing to make the jump. Plus, I suspect that a different kind of editor will need to evolve - an editor who is also a powerful public persona. Just as Harlan Ellison's intros helped make his Dangerous Visions anthologies so popular, we'll find that the editors who can write provocative essays about the books and stories they publish and can become celeb writers in their own right will succeed best in online bookshelves.

Heck, if I could handle the microcharges and had the time to read, I'd start such a bookshop myself right now!

But in no sense is any of this likely to be a replacement for print books, except when it comes to short stories and poems, which don't have a strong print market right now. I can imagine the "bookshelf" concept thriving alongside a continuing print-book industry -- but not until and unless authors are able to detach the ebook rights from the print rights. As long as the print publishers remain in control of erights, we will continue to get the stupid, encryption-based schemes that are based more on fear than on understanding of how readers search for and respond to stories. And ebooks will continue to be most useful in keeping out-of-print and small-audience books available without the cost of printing.

-- 2 August 2000

Lesson #12

Question:

I have often had ideas about stories, but I am always wary to begin the process of writing that story down. I'm not sure why, but I suspect it has to do with the fact that the story becomes real and therefore imperfect when the writing begins. Before I begin, I have this idea that the story will be compelling, entertaining, deeply moving, and yet clever and witty. But as soon as I begin writing it, I see holes and flaws and unresolved problems. I need to suppress the editor in me long enough to get the story out.

-- Anonymous

OSC Replies:

You can never suppress the editor in you, and you don't want to -- it's the editor that helps you decide which events and details to include and which to leave out. What matters is to get your internal editor looking for the right things.

Basically, that means that you must get your inner editor to stop looking at the "prose style" of your writing, period. Language is nothing. You can write any scene ten thousand ways -- and a thousand of them will be fine, and a hundred will be brilliant. Of course, nine thousand won't be fine, and of those, about five thousand will truly suck. But who cares? You can fiddle with language whenever you want. It has nothing to do with the writing process.

What you need your inner editor to be concentrating on is what happens and why. Have you chosen the right beginning point? Are you giving us the point-of-view character's understanding of what these events mean? Is it clear to the reader what's actually happening? Is the present event important, or merely a filler while you give exposition? *Those* things you need to be watching carefully, and those are the things that decide whether your story will feel important, true, and clear to the reader from the start.

And, as an added bonus, when you're concentrating on story matters instead of prose matters, usually your prose style stops being controlled and starts being natural -- your real voice (or one of your voices) emerging effortlessly. Your style will probably be much better when you aren't thinking about it than it ever is when you are.

As to choosing when and where to begin a story, the rule of thumb is to identify the inciting incident -- the event that causes the main character to become involved in the main events of the story. However, this is so vague that it can be almost useless. Therefore I've broken it down into four basic story structures (*not* plots) and how to use each to choose the proper beginning point for the tale. I call it my MICE quotient, and you'll find it in both of my books on writing, How to Write Science Fiction and Fantasy, and Character and Viewpoint. Your library should have them, or your bookstore can order them from Writer's Digest Books.

-- 2 August 2000

Lesson #13

Question:

I purchased Ender's Shadow the day it came out . . . and only finally started reading it! I've been taking my time and studying it to see how you approached telling the same story from a different point of view. It's fascinating to look at in that way. Today I came up with a question to tie into something I've been doing.

I told you my novel is finished and went to the Wise Readers. The feedback has come back and this is what I'm hearing: I'm losing people in the area of motivation. I have scenes where characters do things and the readers are asking: Why? I made it a point throughout the novel to *not* tell motivations, but try to show them. But in doing it this way, I have failed to achieve internal and sometimes external transport, and I get a lot of "why is she or he doing this?" questions. I put thought into it beforehand, and assumed readers would figure it out by seeing how the characters did what they did. Didn't work.

Today, I was reading chapter 6 of Ender's Shadow and on page 97 Bean starts messing around with the air vent system. As the scene went on, I started to question: Why is he doing this? And then I asked: Why is *Card* doing this? The External Transport was mostly there, I could see Bean climbing into this air shaft (with only a few confusing moments when he couldn't turn his head right or left). But I kept stopping and saying to myself, why is he doing this?

Then, of course, on page 99 he starts to wonder the same thing. And I say: Ah ha! Card knew what he was doing.

And I got to thinking why you did it the way you did it. Because Bean is the POV, and *he* doesn't realize it, it makes sense that he would later suddenly question why he was doing this. So it made sense . . . but that didn't stop me from questioning why. I had those three times that I asked what was going on.

That appears to have been the "price" you paid. It's relatively minor, but it is something that happened.

And I guess it fits into my question and problem. People reading my book are wondering at times why my characters do what they do. I have looked at it and I'm thinking: It's *clear*. But obviously I'm not right on that, because two readers are wondering what's going on.

How can I fix this?

I can tell. I can start the scene and *tell* everyone *why* they are doing it.

"Bean looked at the airvent and it triggered a memory from the Clean Room. He saw vents, tubes, passages . . . and then nothing. What was it? The vision did not continue. But he had to find out. He went over to the vent, and started prying it up with his fingers..."

Maybe that's more showing, but at least you get some sense that there is a reason he's doing it.

Or I could try to use Deeper POV Penetration. Have my characters think why they are doing what they are doing it.

I hope you can help me. I'm beginning to doubt myself, and I can't afford to do that. I have to learn how to establish credible motives for my characters so I don't keep losing readers at key moments in the text. I hope you can help me.

-- Jason Smith

OSC Replies:

You said: "I made it a point throughout the novel to *not* tell motivations, but try to show them."

And you did this because ... of those morons who told you "show don't tell"? Because motivation is unshowable. It must be told. (In fact, most things must be told.) The advice "show don't tell" is applicable in only a few situations -- most times, most things, you tell-don't-show. I get so impatient with this idiotic advice that has been plaguing writers for generations.

Motivation is precisely the one thing that *cannot* be shown. What movies do -- using dialogue or most-obvious-assumed-motive to communicate motive is actually not very good because there are no shades or subtleties and rarely can be (it just takes so darn much screen time!). It's one of the reasons why movies simply aren't very good at subtle motivation, and constantly have to reach for obvious audience sympathies ...

When you are using a POV character, the single most important thing that you *must* tell the reader is the *full purpose* of what the character is doing, as soon as the character knows it himself. If you do not, you are cheating, and the audience gets less and less patient with you, until they lose interest because you are not telling them the most important information that people come to stories -- especially fiction -- to receive!

But then, you detected that yourself in how I handled POV in ES.

When you asked why he was doing it, I was in fact teasing you, but ... not really. Because Bean *didn't* have a plan. He's a kid who sticks his nose -- no, his whole body -- wherever he can, and only later realizes the possibilities. If I had him know a plan in advance, it wouldn't be true to his character. Basically, he has a whole modus vivendi: He always knows everything he can about the place he's in, so he knows all his strategies for escape and control.

So I was revealing patterns in his character *and* having him act true to character -- but I didn't make you wait very long before letting you see Bean discover a conscious purpose for what he was doing. But the unconscious purpose I could not tell you directly, because Bean didn't know it himself -- it was instinctive....

It's all part of POV ...

Your suggestion: "I can tell. I can start the scene and *tell* everyone *why* they are doing it.

"'Bean looked at the airvent and it triggered a memory from the Clean Room. He saw vents, tubes, passages . . . and then nothing. What was it? The vision did not continue. But he had to find out. He went over to the vent, and started prying it up with his fingers...'"

"Maybe that's more showing, but at least you get some sense that there is a reason he's doing it."

This idea doesn't work for me precisely because *if* Bean *notices* what prompts his action, then he would immediately conclude a purpose for it. To me it feels, not like true pov, but rather like the author making sure we get the connection.

In fact, this is what *film* does ... it shows you what the character is seeing so you know the connection he's making. But remember, the cinematic point of view is weak in novels. So ... show-don't-tell is a really bad idea, except in the scenes that you choose to show because they are the key scenes that give the drama.

Jason Smith replies:

You got me laughing so hard I can't sit up straight. You said:

"And you did this because ... of those morons who told you "show don't tell"?"

Exactly!!! That's what I've done! Too crazy.

Remember about six months ago when you said something that triggered to me the importance of character motivations? I had to start the novel all over again, and it was fantastic, because I really clicked with my characters.

Funny how it worked out, because while I finally clicked on my characters' motives, and how important they were, I then went and wrote a whole novel without explaining them at all… Because I was trying to show them.

And I have only myself to blame. Because you *do* mention about the showing and telling in Character and Viewpoint. But I've been getting some advice from a gentleman named XXX XXXXX. He's very helpful, and answers all my questions, but he crams show-don't-tell down my throat, and I chose to listen to him.

Thanks for making me laugh. I'm starting over again…

-- 2 August 2000

Lesson #14

This lesson came about as an answer to the following question someone recently wrote to the Student Research Area: *"I was wondering about your response about books not having "a theme." Isn't a theme no more than a inner lesson found within a book that the author uses to convey his/her lesson. A book without a inner lesson isn't worth writing except for the reader's pleasure. My question is what inner lesson do you try to convey within your short stories and novels?"*

Quoth thou: "A book without an inner lesson isn't worth writing except for the reader's pleasure." An interesting idea, but it disappears upon examination, for a reader doesn't take pleasure in reading a story unless the story feels, at some level, as though it matters -- as though important things are happening. (It also has to feel believable, but that's another issue.) So if I write a story that really engages a reader's attention, it will have elements that make the reader care what happens to the people in the story, eager to find out how it all comes out.

What is it that intrigues and interests the readers, that makes the events of the story seem important? It isn't that they really happened -- obviously, we don't read fiction for that. It is almost always that there are issues and problems in the characters' lives that resonate with issues and problems that the reader cares about -- not necessarily that the reader has lived through or will live through, but issues that the reader thinks are very important ones in life.

But are these "issues" a theme? They are always issues that one could write many essays about, but the fiction writer has chosen NOT to write an essay. Therefore, the issue doesn't function as a theme or "lesson." Rather it is part of the story - part of WHY people do the things they do, and what the consequences are when they do them. If the writer has a preconceived conscious plan for how to present a particular philosophical point, he will start to ignore his own unconscious ideas and will force the characters to act out his little allegory. The result is: Bad fiction, and therefore an ineffective presentation of the theme. But if the writer shunts aside those preconceived plans, or subverts them deliberately (i.e., make THOSE ideas belong to a character that the audience is supposed to despise), that very humility leads the writer free to tap into his unconscious feelings and ideas about how the world works and what is worth telling tales about.

The reader who gets the story that truthfully and powerfully connects with the real world by way of the writer's unconscious understanding of it WILL find "themes" in the story. But they won't necessarily be themes that the writer was aware of, and will almost never be themes that the writer "put" into the tale. Just because readers value the powerful connections with reality they find in the fiction they read does not mean that to write great fiction, the writer should "insert" powerful themes. On the contrary, it means that the writer should continue to trust his unconscious mind to make those powerful causal connections and to find powerful, resonant issues.

So let me take your sentence and twist it around to the point where it becomes, if not true, then closer to the truth. You said "A book without an inner lesson isn't worth writing except for the reader's pleasure." What I say is, "A book that gives a reader pleasure does so because the reader cares deeply about issues that the characters face in the tale."

How does a writer know if he's found a powerful issue? Simply this: If the writer cares enough about

these issues to want to tell stories about characters who face them, then there will be readers - perhaps many, perhaps only a few - who will also care about those issues and want to read the stories that the writer writes. In the long run, "hack" work is virtually impossible to do at all well. If you try to write a story that you don't care about, just to make money by satisfying some supposed "commercial" need, you will end up writing a book that nobody cares about, because you didn't care. Most writers who think of themselves as "hacks" (i.e., "taxi-drivers," driving their story wherever the "fare" wants to be taken) in fact, without even realizing it, build their story not on the superficial "commercial" things they attempt to insert, but rather upon deep, core issues that they very much care about. The fact that they have no idea they're doing this makes them all the more effective. It's what separates, for instance, John Grisham and Tom Clancy from a lot of Grisham- and Clancy-wannabes. Their stories remain in touch with matters that they care very much about - but they become less effective (cf. "Street Lawyer") the more conscious the writer becomes of the theme he's trying to develop.

The same is true of literary writers who try to write about themes. In a way, this is identical to "hack" work - trying to insert elements that will please a particular kind of audience. Most of the time, when these stories work at all, they do so, not because of the "plan" of the work but in spite of it, because of unconscious concerns that bubble up into the story and give it life despite the deadly story-killing "theme" elements that the writer consciously manipulates.

That's why, when you really love a book, it makes you think about important ideas and issues and fresh and powerful ways. It isn't because the writer planned it that way. It's because the writer let his unconscious mind have a lot of chances to control elements of the story. It's because the writer got out of the way and let the truth of his heart dominate the opinions in his mind.

-- 2 August 2000