WRITING SCIENCE FICTION

and

FANTASY

20 DYNAMIC ESSAYS BY TODAY'S TOP PROFESSIONALS

By the Editors of *Analog* and
Asimov's Science Fiction

Writing Science Fiction and Fantasy

Edited by

Gardner Dozois, Tina Lee,
Stanley Schmidt, Ian Randal Strock,
and Sheila Williams

Design by Erich Hobbing

Acknowledgments

Contents

Part III
THE BUSINESS OF WRITING

Part IV
APPENDIX

Introduction

As the editors of *Analog Science Fiction and Fact* and *Asimov's Science Fiction* magazines we see dozens of manuscripts every week from writers who would like us to buy and publish them. We would like to buy them, too; like every other editor, we are constantly searching for new talent. However, we receive so many submissions, and have so few pages in our magazines, that we simply cannot buy more than 1 or 2 percent of the stories we are offered. To sell us a story, you must make your manuscript stand out as *special* from at least 98 percent of the competition.

How can you do that? Many beginning writers ask us for criticism and advice, and those who don't ask would still like to get it. Regrettably, the volume of submissions makes it quite impossible for most editors to comment individually on submissions, except for those few that they *almost* want to publish.

We hope that this book will be the next best thing. Obviously it can't offer criticism of your manuscript, but it does offer a wealth of useful tips and insights from several well-known professionals in the field. Read them; strive to understand them and see how they apply to your own work; and you just may arrive a little sooner at the point where editors *want* to take your individual hand and help you over the hump.

This is not a "how-to" manual. It does not say, "Follow these steps, in this order, and you will become a best-selling author." Writing is too subtle and too competitive a business, and there are too many ways of doing it, for that to be possible. We have known hundreds of professional writers, and no two of them work

in quite the same way. Some of the authors in these pages may even seem to contradict each other, and for that we make no apologies. Science fiction and fantasy have become a very broad, diversified field. Different writers have different ideas about how to approach it, and even a single writer may find that what seems to be a general principle most of the time does not apply at all in a particular case. But it's a good idea to know the "rules" before you break them, if only so you will understand that you are doing something unusual—and why.

What we suggest is that you read *all* of these essays attentively and take from them what seems valuable for your goals. To build a writing career, you must find what works for *you* and then stick to it, no matter what anyone else says works for him or her.

But never forget that, in the final analysis, it is *readers* who decide what works and what doesn't.

Good luck!

—The Editors

Part I

STORYTELLING

On the Writing of Speculative Fiction

ROBERT A. HEINLEIN

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

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

The editor suggested that I write on "Science Fiction in the Slicks." I shan't do so because it is not a separate subject. Several

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

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

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

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

There are three main plots for the human-interest story: boy-meets-girl, the Little Tailor, and the man-who-learned-better. Credit the last category to L. Ron Hubbard; I had thought for years that there were but two plots—he pointed out to me the third type.

Boy-meets-girl needs no definition. But don't disparage it. It reaches from the "Iliad" to John Taine's *Time Stream*. It's the

greatest story of them all and has never been sufficiently exploited in science fiction. To be sure, it appears in most SF stories, but how often is it dragged in by the hair and how often is it the compelling and necessary element that creates and then solves the problem? It has great variety: boy-fails-to-meet-girl, boy-meets-girl-too-late, boy-meets-too-many-girls, boy-loses-girl, boy-and-girl-renounce-love-for-higher-purpose. Not science fiction? Here is a throw-away plot; you can have it free: elderly man meets very young girl; they discover that they are perfectly adapted to each other, perfectly in love, "soul mates." (Don't ask me how. It's up to you to make the thesis credible. If I'm going to have to write this story, I want to be paid for it.)

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

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

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

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

The definition of a story as something interesting-but-not-necessarily-true is general enough to cover all writers, all stories—

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

People changing under stress:

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

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

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

Another type of fiction alleged to be science fiction is the story laid in the future, or on another planet, or in another dimension, or such, which could just as well have happened on Fifth Avenue, in 1947. Change the costumes back to now, cut out the pseudo-scientific double-talk and the blaster guns and it turns out to be

a straight adventure story, suitable, with appropriate facelifting, to any other pulp magazine on the newsstand.

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

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

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

1. The conditions must be, in some respect, different from here-and-now, although the difference may lie only in an invention made in the course of the story.
2. The new conditions must be an essential part of the story.
3. The problem itself—the "plot"—must be a *human* problem.
4. The human problem must be one that is created by, or indispensably affected by, the new conditions.
5. And lastly, no established fact shall be violated, and, furthermore, when the story requires that a theory contrary to present accepted theory be used, the new theory should be rendered reasonably plausible and it must include and explain established facts as satisfactorily as the one the author saw fit to junk. It may be far-fetched, it may seem fantastic, but it must *not* be at variance with observed facts, i.e., if you are going to assume that the human race descended from Martians, then you've *got* to explain our apparent close relationship to terrestrial anthropoid apes as well.

Pardon me if I go on about this. I love to read science fiction, but violation of that last requirement gets me riled. Rocketships should not make banked turns on empty space the way airplanes bank their turns on air. Lizards can't cross-breed with humans. The term "space warp" does not mean anything without elaborate explanation.

Not everybody talking about heaven is going there—and there are a lot of people trying to write science fiction who haven't bothered to learn anything about science. Nor is there any excuse for them in these days of public libraries. You owe it to your readers (a) to bone up on the field of science you intend to introduce into your story; (b) unless you yourself are well-versed in that field, you should also persuade some expert in that field to read your story and criticize it before you offer it to an unsuspecting public. Unless you are willing to take this much trouble, please, *please* stick to a contemporary background you are familiar with. Paderewski had to practice; Sonja Henie still works on her school figures; a doctor puts in many weary years before they will let him operate—why should you be exempt from preparatory effort?

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

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

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

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

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

And so on. I've limited myself to *my* notions about science fiction, but don't forget Mr. Kipling's comment. In any case it isn't necessary to know how—just go ahead and do it. Write what