



The *Illuminata*

Delving Deep Into The Worlds of Science Fiction and Fantasy

Keyman's FIX-tion: Ten Quick Fixes to Improve Fiction Now

Removing the mistakes that make cold molasses flow faster than your writing

Wading through a recent release I was asked to review, I grew increasingly annoyed, wondering how some novels reach publication without (apparently) ever having seen the red of an editor's pen. By page 212 – exactly half way through the tale – with my brain in serious danger of withering to the size of a walnut for lack of stimulation, I decided to set aside the story in favor of dissecting the work to uncover the culprit flaws.

I didn't have to look far.

Since some benefit ought to come from the novel's presence on the market, I figured why not let it serve as our classroom example of how *not* to write. Apply these quick fixes today and I promise your fiction will be more marketable, your storytelling more engaging, and your voice instantly elevated to a slush pile standout.

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1. **Seem:** weakens and dilutes.

Does the action in your story only *seem* to be happening? Is your writing peppered with sentences such as: *Starr seemed to be growing annoyed*; or *Although Mitch seemed to have more to say, he remained silent*; or *Clara seemed to be losing her patience*?

Be direct, as in: *Starr grew annoyed*; *Mitch had more to say, but remained silent*; *Clara lost her patience*.

Writing *seemlessly* gives your novel a trim, tailored look and creates action with greater impact. People don't want to read about things that *seem* to take place. Dare

to be more direct and definitive in your style. Speak with authority.

2. **Finally:** kingpin of failed attempts at pacing.

Stories sprinkled heavily with *finally* are filled with manufactured hesitancy: *She hesitated, drumming her fingers on the bar, finally answering the question after downing her drink*.

Simplify, simplify. *After drumming her fingers and downing the drink, she answered*.

Readers easily interpret actions like finger drumming and nursing a drink as acts of hesitancy. Don't hit them over the head by also *telling* them the character is hesitating. What's more, if your audience already knows a character is at a bar, it's a good bet that's where they are drumming their fingers, so why add that? It's unnecessary. *Finally* (Okay, I just had to say that), since it generally follows that a *question* is what one answers – especially since the reader just read the question in the preceding paragraph – you can nix *answering the question* and just say *she answered*.

Search your manuscript, deleting as many uses of the words *finally* and *hesitate* as you can. Your story's pace can be more aptly controlled through smarter verb choices and carefully sculpted dialogue interspersed with well-placed, well-paced narrative.

3. **Even:** don't *even* think of using it.

Even is another unnecessary word diluting your fiction: *Starr wasn't even sure she wanted another drink*; *Even Mitch agreed with Clara*; *She even swam another lap before finally climbing from the pool*.

Get rid of these words or get outa town by sunrise, pard'ner, cause I'll come gunnin' for ya with my big red pen.

4. **Up, Down, In, Out:** almost always expendable.

Overuse of directional words is plaque on your novel's smile: *The rain fell down in sheets*; *She climbed up the stairs*; *He walked in through the doors*; *Starr walked over to the bar*; *Mitch was sitting out in the yard*. Take a pass through your manuscript to eliminate these unnecessary words.

RPG Corner v4.33: Villany! The Losers Club

by Doug >!< Roper of EPIC Gaming

Have You Hugged You're GM Lately?

With fiction writing, the author can spend as much time as he likes with any character he chooses, creating and developing that character until the author is satisfied, then going back and changing any and everything if he desires. A Game Master doesn't have that luxury most of the time. He can adjust a NPC as long as that character hasn't been introduced to the PCs yet, but once they are exposed to him, the NPCs personality has to remain consistent, otherwise PCs will be confused, or will not catch on when there is a sharp change in personality. As a result, the characters that get the most time to evolve are usually the last to be revealed, meaning that the villains are more often than not the most fully realized characters that the GM can play with. Additionally, they are usually the characters that the GM invents first when working out a plot.

I think that most Game Masters will admit to spending a lot of extra time and polish on their villains, even though the creations are doomed to fall under the bullets, blades, claws, falling safes, exploding cars or careful poisons of the PCs. I know I do. Villains present a way for the GM to accomplish something, every now and then, that the Player Characters do almost every session. Win. (True, the goal for everyone in a RPG shouldn't be to win, but instead to have an enjoyable time. I maintain that achieving a victory from time to time is healthy and essential to player enjoyment.) While these victories may only be small and ultimately forgettable for the Players, the GM will more probably than not look back on them with a good deal of fondness. Because GMs so often watch their careful plans and clever NPCs end up under the PC's heels, they'll take whatever "victories" they can get, and usually the only NPC with the right stuff to foil the heroes (at least for a little while) is the villain.

Villains are interesting because they aren't good, and they can operate outside the strict moral and ethical codes that govern heroes. Everyone would love to cut loose like some villains, to do what they want when they want and so what if some people get hurt. Villains are incredibly selfish and egocentric, two qualities that every one of us has in some small amount. Audiences like watching the villain because he operates without restraint, and I think GMs like them for much the same reason. When operating as a villain, the GM doesn't have to hold back or keep his players first. Villains don't usually hold anyone in more importance than

themselves, and having the ability to make the PCs lives a little rough just feels good sometimes. Sometimes it's just plain good to be bad.

I've stressed on many occasions the philosophy that the PCs must be the stars of the show if the game is going to succeed. If the players aren't happy, then the game will fold. Despite what a lot of people will tell you about RPGs and the concept of "winning," (that is, RPGs aren't about winning, as the games tend to go on and on, if the players are willing to play and the GM is willing to write and run, they are supposed to be more about having a good time and enjoying the story and interaction) if there aren't some clear and enjoyable victories over the forces of evil, the good guys won't be too happy. So knowing that the Player Characters are the heroes, and will ultimately find a way to win (even if the GM has to fudge die rolls and rewrite whole chapters of his careful plot to ensure it), why in the hell would anyone want to be a GM? By choosing to run games, aren't you really choosing to become something of a punching bag for your friends? Well, as a matter of fact, that's exactly the case.

The best Game Masters can divorce themselves from the need for positive reinforcement from within the game, meaning that the GM's characters (NPCs) do not have to succeed in their aspirations for the GM to be happy with the game, and get it from outside the game (assuming the Players are gracious enough to thank the GM for his efforts, and to let him know that they are having a good time). A GM like this will be happy seeing the slow unraveling of his plot by the PCs, and will enjoy the interaction between his characters and the PCs. He will feel victorious when the PCs uncover a carefully hidden clue, or when they finally reach a conclusion that the GM has carefully cultivated through hints and dialogue with NPCs. He will also realize that for some of his NPCs to succeed, the PCs will have to fail. Minor victories are okay for antagonistic NPCs, but should always be balanced by major victories for the players, placing the GM back into the "loser's club" along with many of his villains.

GM's coming to grips with losing their favorite characters isn't something I can provide a guide for. Each GM is different and must learn to accept the inevitability of defeat in his or her own way. In taking up the immense responsibility of running a game, the GM must be willing to lose repeatedly, and must be willing to put aside hours or days or months of work as PCs miss clues or NPCs. Moments after the loss

Con't on page 10

Fandom Who Filk (Part 3)

by Terry Crotinger/montanasings

You and your group decided how you want to filk, what type is allowed—songs only, short stories, poems—and possibly a time limit for each person (five minutes is typical). It is time to finalize your ideas and promote your group. One thing to consider as you filk away is where you are getting your filk songs/material.

Copyrighted Material. One other thing to consider when developing a filk group is if copied music/ words are acceptable. Copyright laws are specific. Grabbing a screen shot of the words from an original song off the Internet is still in violation—even if it is for private use and not sold (only for school use, blah, blah, blah)—no matter what you may have been told or want to believe. Unless that page specifically says the author has given permission to copy and use that song, any rendering—in any form—is a violation. Sorry—that is the law. Wishful thinking or circumventing this issue is pointless. Decide to ignore it and accept any consequences or contact each author individually and ask permission to copy the words/music. Some filk writers have compiled books and anthologies of their music—this can be pricey if the goal is to acquire a mass collection.

To violate or not to violate? Somewhere in fandom, a group has decided to compile a songbook. That will be a question your group needs to determine. It is unlikely the copyright police will locate a violating filk group. On the other hand, inviting a published, well-known filker to your filk and bring out their own copied songs to hand around might bring 'em. But honor and courtesy to the author is always the better part of fandom valor.

Your core group has discussed: copyright issues, if children are allowed, if food is acceptable (many do pot-lucks since they only meet once a month), and if alcohol is acceptable—B.Y.O.B., (and a designated driver or two in the wings, if it is), you are almost ready to start once you secure a place and time to filk, and locate other like-minded fans to filk with!

Where do you find members to add to your group? Word of mouth is absolutely the best, and cheapest, way to advertise. Let local sci-fi and gaming groups know about your group by arranging to visit their meetings and give a short information bullet about your filk group with contact information and specifics. If you feel bold, sing a short parody or example so they understand this is not a painful experience. You may get a room-clearing response

as gals and guys (especially guys) cough and look at you like you asked them to sing a solo. But, you may find a few kindred spirits. Always leave a handout and go on your way.

Conventions are another great place to advertise. After checking with the ConCom (Convention Committee) hand out fliers and leave information in a central spot to alert con-goers you exist. If a filking group or concert is not scheduled, contact the ConCom and volunteer to fill a spot in their panel schedule and give a filking demonstration and information session. Filk 101 may end up being a permanent panel every year!

Feeling even bolder? Perhaps your core group can do a little filking at the local library or bookstore? The big chains encourage readings and book discussion groups in their store, many offering to let local folksingers use them as their secret coffeehouse. They may allow your group to filk a little after a sci-fi reading or fill a time-slot they have open. Ask—you never know. Or, after checking with the proper authorities, attend local fairs and stand on a well-traveled avenue and sing a few PG-13 numbers with your core group while you pass out fliers. You may surprise your neighbors with your undiscovered interests, and you might find they'd enjoy an occasional filk.

Since filk groups seldom have an official status or budget, the cheaper, the better. After utilizing your resources, the Internet and posting your contact information at local colleges and libraries, start filking. Even if you only start with your core group, start filking. Use the "if you build it, they will come," mentality. A group roster of ten to fifteen is a manageable group. If your group gets too large, a splinter group procreating from yours is testimony to your good idea.

Filk Trivia. Some filk groups have traditions. Our group has a sock (from the Colonel of somebody's husband's friend? who was in Desert Storm) that is thrown at the person who apologizes before, during, and/or after they filk. The "hum-ha" of needing to preface how bad they sound, or whining because they hadn't practiced, takes up a lot of time. So, our group throws The Colonel's Sock at 'em. It's all in good fun.

Which brings me to a fine point of filking: people should practice! Nothing is more boring/ embarrassing than listening to Johnny-on-the-spot who didn't bother to make sure what the tune was or could even pronounce the words and gets up

Con't on page 10

The Writer's Block: Why Horror?

by Charles Gramlich

In keeping with my last two columns, I'm going to look again at issues related to writing horror fiction. And one question any writer should ask when deciding to pursue a genre is: why do people enjoy that genre? Why do people like scary stuff, for example? As both a psychologist and a horror writer, I've given this issue considerable thought.

First, though, I believe there is an important distinction between reading scary books and watching scary movies, even though I don't hear many critics discuss this difference. What I'm talking about is this: watching movies is often a social event while reading is solitary. Most of the time, people watch scary movies *together*. I don't think this completely changes the reasons that I've given below as to why people seek out horror fiction, but it enhances them.

1): First and foremost, people like horror fiction, whether in print or movies, because it is *exciting*. When their bodies are physically stimulated, whether by something pleasant or something frightening, people are energized. Their muscles surge with blood. Their minds sharpen. They feel alive. As long as their excitement doesn't cross the line into true horror or terror, the feeling of being alive is a good one. This is why people ride roller coasters.

If there are other folks around, such as when people are watching a movie together, individuals can feed off each other's energies. This amps the excitement up even further, creating a more powerful effect. Music concerts do the same thing in a slightly different way.

Of course, some people find scary stuff *too* energizing, *too* intense, to the point where it evokes a sense of real terror. And they turn away. There are plenty of such people, ones who don't like horror, but there are plenty more, such as myself, who enjoy a good scare.

2): A second reason why people like horror fiction is so that they can experience fearful events in a safe environment. They can have the delicious shiver without the mind wrenching terror that they would feel if such things happened to them for real.

Think about how nice it is to sleep all snug in your blankets when it's cold and raining outside your window. The presence of the freezing weather outside just adds to the pleasure you feel being safe *inside*. Reading horror fiction or watching a horror movie can produce much the same feeling, and if you watch the movie with friends the effect is enhanced.

3): Horrific tales also let people test themselves against imagined threats. In a way, such stories allow folks to practice for something they might one day face, not monsters necessarily, but something just as dangerous. For children, play is a process of learning to be an adult, of practicing the things through games that they will—or might—one day have to do for real. In this sense, reading or watching horror is a type of play, of practice. What do you do if you are confronted with someone or something that wants to kill you? Well, for one thing, you *don't* go in the basement.

I think this *testing* of themselves is more true for men, especially young men, than it is for women. And it is hugely powerful when men are together where they can show their disdain for the horrific. Together they can feel invincible, as if they can stand against anything. Perhaps in the distant past of the human race they sometimes had to. Perhaps in that sense, playing with fear may be coded into our genes.

4): There is something else, though, for those such as myself, who might be called connoisseurs of horror. That is, what is scary to most people isn't necessarily scary to us. There are actually few books that have truly scared me. *Ghost Story* by Peter Straub and *The Haunting of Hill House* by Shirley Jackson are two that did. Two movies that managed to creep me out were *The Exorcist* and *The Ring*.

Take a movie like *Alien*, however, which often makes the list of the top scary movies of all time. I loved *Alien*, but it *didn't* scare me. Instead, it had what I call the "coolness" factor, especially with that infamous chest-burster scene. *Alien* and its sequels were visually and emotionally exciting. They offered an adventure. Personally, this is why I read horror fiction and watch horror movies, to have my imagination stimulated. If you can get me to say, "cool," then I'll buy every book you write and watch every film you make.

At its heart, the enjoyment of horror fiction is irrational. But humans are *not* just rational beings. In fact, we're not *primarily* rational. We are emotional. And fear is one of the three major emotions that people experience—joy, sadness, and fear.

Whenever you write, *whatever* you write, keep in mind the reasons why people might want to read the product of your hard work. Shaping your stories with an understanding of, and an appreciation for, why people like what they like can only help your chances of getting published.

Reviews

The Gladiator Philip Wylie



Bison Books, 2004
\$15.95, Trade Paper, 332 pgs.
ISBN 0-8032-9840-4
Review by D. L. Parker

We forget, today, just how popular the now discredited science of eugenics was in the early part of the last century. Nazi racist policies gave eugenics the smear from which it has really never recovered, but it wasn't

just the Nazis who espoused social Darwinism – the improvement of the race “to fulfill nature’s wishes”. In 1927, U. S. Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes ruled in support of involuntary sterilization “in order to prevent ourselves being swamped with incompetence.” As a result, 45,127 American citizens were involuntarily sterilized between 1907 and 1945. Even today, and *especially* today, with the new discoveries in genetics, the dark shadow of eugenics hangs over us. Eugenic laws are still being passed (China, for example, enacted legislation in 1994 restricting marriage for persons having certain disabilities; modern Dutch euthanasia laws could also be considered questionable). The moral and ethical issues of eugenics will *never* go away.

Philip Wylie wrote his story “The Gladiator” when eugenics was in its hey-day. The story has been cited as one of the inspirations for the hero we know today as Superman. In Wylie’s version, a scientist discovers a treatment that imparts tremendous and unnatural strength to living beings. He doses his own pregnant wife surreptitiously with the substance. Lo and behold, a monstrously strong son is born to the twain. The boy can hurl boulders like baseballs and lift cars off their wheels. Growing older, he exhausts the weaker sex with his demanding virility – no woman can handle Hugo Danner for long!

But though handicapped with some of the chauvinistic and racist attitudes common to the time, Wylie at least makes his superman more complex than his later cartoon namesake. Danner is as tempted by the dark side of his powers as the light. He remarks, “I would set out to stamp crime off the earth”, then dreams of scorning the universe and unleashing the strength he has choked back all his life in killing and destroying.

For humanity never quite accepts Hugo Danner. He’s a freak, until he finally meets Professor Daniel Hardin. Hardin is the noble, white-haired professor who dreams of starting a new race of people, “eugenic offspring”, reared secretly in the wilds, who will one day conquer the world of lesser human beings and rule supreme.

Hugo is tormented. Does Hardin’s plan defy the Creator? *Is* there any God to defy? Well, let’s say that Hugo *does* get his answer, though the reader is left to interpret his death for himself: does Hugo die the just death of a blasphemer or suffer as a Promethean martyr?

The book is dated, in both its writing style and its attitudes, but it remains a thought-provoking work and one of the early classics of speculative fiction. The questions it raises with regard to eugenics are still as applicable – or more so – today as then. I admit, these issues are of particular interest to me at this time, I am in the process of writing a science fiction novel (entitled “MWB-11”) that envisions a limited survivor society facing, among other things, issues of genetic health due to the ravages of a terrible futuristic war. Not only do the survivors have to solve the problem of health for their limited and damaged gene pool, they have to face the temptation to breed for certain superpowers of their own. A temptation they’ve already succumbed to, in fact...

I know where I weigh in on the subject, of course. If eugenic sciences and social Darwinism were allowed full sway, who would pay the price? We’d have no Stephen Hawking; no Vincent van Gogh; no Lou Gehrig. Science, art, and sports would suffer. Most of all, we could no longer be called, in any ethical and moral dimension, what I recognize as *Humanity*.

“...and no self-respecting Heinlein character would pay to have his enemy beat up. He’d do it himself, then cook a gourmet meal for the survivors before re-inventing the hyperdrive to get him, his livestock, and seven beautiful, red-headed concubines off planet...”

— Bruce Johnson

Reviews

The Dragon's Lair

Lisa Guilfoil



March 2005

\$19.95, Trade Paper, 421

ISBN 0-9713278-2-3

Review by garrie keyman

This Lair is Draggin'

Novice writer Lisa Guilfoil's debut, *The Dragon's Lair*, introduces a young bar owner whose traumatic past catches up with her. Confronting her demons is Skye Dakota, the supposedly tough-as-Teflon proprietor of the Dragon's Lair, a well-appointed bar on space station Pettit. Set in a nebulous Earth-referenced future where space stations boast not only bars but also Olympic-size swimming pools and thoroughly equipped gyms, *The Dragon's Lair* reads like an early draft of a promising tale that evaded an editor's pen.

Tough, I suppose, because she is a vodka-swilling masochist, Skye Dakota is beaten to a pulp by a couple of bad'un early in the book. Her recovery is painfully slow, especially for the reader. Skye learns the biggest bad'un of 'em all is the one who had her roughed up, and she means to find out why, but her pummeling stirs memories that haunt her dreams.

Enduring countless days of self-induced insomnia using something referred to as *stim stix*, Skye begins pulling away from her small circle of friends. After surviving on alternating doses of vodka and coffee while punishing herself with grueling work-outs, she at last decides she must return to her roots, where her old friends are apparently tougher than her current crew, and can help her regain her 'edge' to face-down space gangster Viktor.

If it's any clue about the book's pace, this set-up takes 174 pages.

Guilfoil is a young writer yet to learn what *show, don't tell* really means. What's more, she tells us over and over and over. Nevertheless, victims of domestic violence harboring revenge fantasies might have spun *The Dragon's Lair* into a campy cult classic if *Kill Bill* hadn't come along first.

While *The Dragon's Lair* is not being marketed as any particular genre, it reads like a romance set in space. Tossed in for that groovy sci-fi effect are words like *chronometer* and *vidcom*, while sprinkled throughout is the occasional unexplained (and therefore ever annoying) foreign term. With 287 pages of story wearing 421 pages of text, *The Dragon's Lair* might have fared

better if Guilfoil had turned one of her tale's bloody knives on her manuscript; there are entire scenes and characters that should have been nixed.

What's more, with a volume this thick you might at least expect a substantial subplot, but don't look for it here. In truth, the most impressive part of this novel is Kandace Wright's richly drawn if darkly rendered cover art, even if what's lurking beyond the door is anyone's guess. It looks like the framework to the Hindenburg.

Get past the heroine's name, the smatterings of Shakespeare (*Hey, they did it in Star Trek, right?*) and strings of adjectives where one would do, and you might actually read *The Dragon's Lair* cover to cover. If you do, let me know ... and how many *stim stix* it took to do it.

Blood of Wolves (Legends of Kern, 1)

Loren J. Coleman



Ace, June 2005

\$6.99, Mass Market, 272 pp.

ISBN 0441012922

Review by Harriet Klausner

To the villagers of Gaud in the Kingdom of Cimmeria, winter feels like it will never end. Food is being rationed and the people go on raids seeking bounty held by others. The animals have not yet appeared so there is no

hunting for fresh meat and the Vanir raiders from the north steal what little the clans have.

When Cul becomes chief, he exiles the weakest of Clan Gaudt as well as Kern "Wolf-Eye" who people distrust because of his appearance. Unlike the dark blue-eyed clansmen, he has pale skin and amber glowing eyes with white hair. While on the trek to bury the dead clan chief, he sees the men of Vanir raiding villages and he returns to warn his former clansmen and help them in their fight. He decides to follow the raiders and bring back the hostages and his little band travels north and west into the heart of the land of the men of Vanir determined to fight the men who want to destroy the clans.

This takes place at the time Conan is king and magic is a fighting skill used in battle. The leader of the enemy is said to be immortal, a son of Ymir who has the strength of many men and is a friend of the gods his people worship. There is plenty of action and gory battle scenes but the most exciting part of this storyline is the protagonist who goes from outcast to hero and leader. Sword and sorcery fans as well as readers who love the Conan stories will have a lot of fun reading this exceptional tale.

Reviews

Everran's Bane Sylvia Kelso



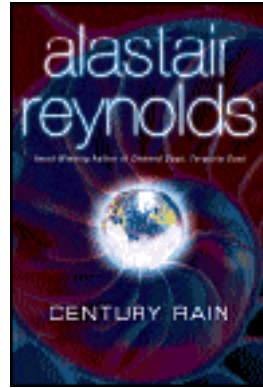
Five Star, June 2005
\$25.95, Hardcover, 225 pp.
ISBN 1594143536
Review by Harriet Klausner

The Kingdom of Everran was a happy place where anyone who wanted to work could find a job and no family was homeless. The vineyards bring in enough money to keep the treasury full and the handsome king is beloved by his subjects, his military, and especially by his adoring wife. Everran's peace ended when the skybane (a dragon) came.

No army can defeat it; no champion can kill it. To stop the ruin of his kingdom, King Beryx sends hearthbard Harran to the dragon's lair to ask what it will take to bring about a truce. Terms are agreed upon, but the dragon gives more to the king when he says the "weapon has not been forged" that could kill it implying something not yet invented could. When a jewel disappears from the dragon's cave, it goes on a rampage, destroying the capital and the surrounding areas. Banished from his own lands the king and his advisors seek the weapon that would end the life of Hawge the dragon not knowing the answer will cause the king a high cost he must pay in order to save his kingdom.

Not every adult fairy tale has a happily ever after ending, *Everran's Bane* is a poignant and moving fantasy in which the real hero must choose between giving up much he holds dear or losing everything to the dragon. There are clues sprinkled throughout the tense plot that hint at what must happen to defeat the dragon, but the king and readers will never guess what they reveal until the climax. That shocker will leave the audience stunned with the revelation that Sylvia Kelso is the real thing.

Century Rain Alastair Reynolds



Ace, Jun 2005
\$24.95, Hardcover, 512 pp.
ISBN: 0441012906
Review by Harriet Klausner

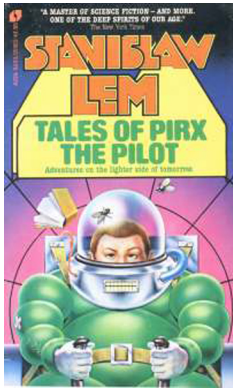
Not long after the end of World War II, American jazz musician Wendell Floyd came to Paris to play. Though he had some gigs, he and his band partner Andre Custine earn their keep as private investigators. French landlord Blanchard hires them to investigate the death of a tenant Susan White; the cops declared her death a suicide or accident, but their current client believes a homicide occurred.

Three hundred years later, the earth is a frozen wasteland devastated by the twenty-third century technological calamity the Nanocaust. Archeologist Verity Augur leads a dig beneath the icy landscape of Paris until an assistant is killed during the excavation. Verity expects to be blamed and her career aborted when the tribunal hearing rules. Still, she keeps working as the bureaucracy is slow to begin the inquiry. Soon she finds "threads" that tie her present to 1950s Paris and the route to arrive in this warmer upbeat city. There she meets Wendell; they quickly realize they need one another to solve their respective scenarios. Neither expected nor prepared for an overarching revelation that they find in the Paris Metro that could destroy space occupying both worlds.

Century Rain is an exciting mixing of an Urban Noir inside a fabulous quantum physics based science fiction thriller. The story line is action-packed, moving back and forth between the ages but mostly commingling in the 1950s. Wendell and Verity are a fine pairing while the support cast enhances understanding of both ages and the string that bounds time and place. The set up for the finale is so good that a wonderfully developed finish feels almost anti-climatic as Alastair Reynolds is at his best.

Reviews

Tales of Pirx the Pilot Stanislaw Lem



Harcourt, 1979
Paperback, 206 pgs.
ISBN 0-380-55665-0
Review by Terry Crotinger

Pirx, the Pilot, might be the equivalent of a young, inexperienced MacGyver (on a bad day) as the reader suffers with Pirx through his test pilot phase, trying to pass his certification during an intolerable test flight that includes pieces of his space ship coming apart in the cockpit, his cheat-sheet floating out of reach (with his cumbersome spacesuit on) and a couple of flies buzzing around, one making fatal contact with the damaged equipment causing it to short out as it arcs, with sparks—just when Pirx really needs it to maneuver his space ship. And that's just the first story.

As Stanislaw Lem continues with the tales of Pirx the Pilot, the reader realizes that this book is mis-titled. Not all the adventures are on the lighter side of tomorrow. In fact, by the last short story, Pirx realizes he is an unwilling witness as he listens to a robot unconsciously reenact the final messages of a doomed crew during a famous space tragedy. Mr. Lem writes humor, introspection and caution into his likable and fallible Pirx.

A companion book, *More Tales of Pirx the Pilot*, continues with more riveting tales—in case someone just can't get enough of Pirx. An uncommon name, surprisingly there is a plethora of Pirx-y names including a musician (Czech) named Pirx, a San Francisco Bay punk group called, Pirx the Pilot, (neither of which have anything to do with the book) and a 1979 Polish/Soviet Union released movie based on "The Test" (the first story in *Tales of Pirx the Pilot*). The book and the movie quickly became a cult hit in several countries.

Polish born Stanislaw Lem wrote the book, *Solaris*, which the movie by the same title was based on. His stories are so widely read that many have been translated into 47 languages. A few phrases or words seem out of place to American readers, but these are soon forgotten as the author plunges Pirx into his job as a pilot and unsuspecting detective. The Pirx series (yes, a whole series of books and stories) is science fiction—with solid science and mystery, fluff and

substance. Pirx is a guy-doing-his-job kind of guy, with a couple Band-Aids stuck on the outside of his spacesuit. Reprinted numerous times, finding a first edition hardback is a collectible find. And if you can locate an early paperback edition, the covers are much more interesting, with that touch of Polish humor showing through that has made Mr. Lem a well-enjoyed author world-wide.

The Dragonbone Chair Tad Williams



DAW, October 1989
Mass Market, 766pgs.
ISBN: 0886773849
Review by Scott H. Andrews

This classic 1988 fantasy bridges the 80s epic fantasy style of boy heroes and glorious quests, like Raymond E. Feist, and the vast gritty epic fantasy of the 90s, like George R. R. Martin. Although Tad Williams expands the detail of his setting and the scope of his story beyond that of most 80s fantasy, *The Dragonbone Chair* still features many fantasy clichés from that period. These, combined with the erratic pace and uneven prose, make this novel a mixed success.

The first half of *The Dragonbone Chair* moves at a numbingly slow pace. The plot doesn't begin until King John's death, around page 200 of the paperback. Many of the previous sections do build Simon's characterization, but that could have been achieved more succinctly after the plot was moving. Some other scenes, such as those between Towser and the king, are beautifully poignant but completely unnecessary. After the initial climax in Doctor Morgenes's tower room, Williams deluges the reader with pages of Simon's vague wandering through the catacombs. Then after a second climax on the Thisterborg hill, Williams tells Simon's rural wanderings in excruciating detail. The plot picks up at the end of Part Two, between gratuitous chapters of peripheral characters' political maneuverings. Then, after a brand new character blurts out the whole fantasy backstory, the plot races through two parallel storylines in Part Three and ends with a cliffhanger.

The orphaned kitchen boy Simon reads like a sillier and less compelling version of Raymond E. Feist's Pug. He bumbles through strenuous events but never develops as a character. The syntax of Binbek's dialog perfectly captures a person speaking in a non-native language, but his character rarely moves beyond the mysterious fantasy mentor archetype into a true friend.

Reviews

The various liegemen are almost interchangeable, behind their awkward Saxon-esque names. Of the minor characters, only King John is deeply drawn, and he isn't even involved in the story.

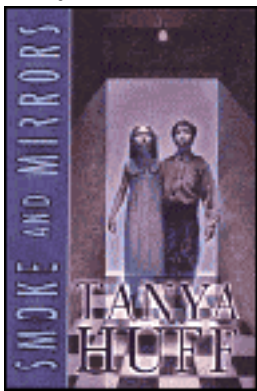
Williams's prose reads awkwardly, particularly by modern standards. His omniscient point-of-view bounces between different characters in the same scenes. He loads down most of his nouns with multiple adjectives. He strings long chains of phrases together into ponderous sentences, often including interjected digressions. He routinely opens sentences with participial phrases, making the reader wait to find out what character is doing that action ("Wandering back to the servant's quarters, Simon wondered..."). He uses laughable dialog attributions ("Not today, Uncle,' Josua smirked."). This amateurish prose seems to crop up in waves, as though from inconsistent copyediting.

The only saving grace in Williams's dense narrative is his beautiful eye for description. The textures of the Hayholt, the toil of rural life, the gloom of the Aldheorte forest, the crumbling splendor of the Sithi city, and the haunting physical decline of King Elias are all described with incredible vividness. However, the sheer number of descriptions bogs down the pace. This novel could have been twice as powerful if it had been trimmed by half.

The Dragonbone Chair remains a classic of 80s fantasy. It can't compare to the rich characterization and tight prose in modern fantasy like Martin or Robin Hobb, but it does show the origin of the 90s fantasy trend toward vast fantasy epics told in laboriously long novels.

Smoke and Mirrors

Tanya Huff



Daw, June 2005
\$24.95, Hardcover, 400 pp.
ISBN 075640262X

Review by Harriet Klausner

Art imitates life when former street prostitute Tony Foster lands a job as a production assistant for the television show *Darkest Night*. The show stars a vampire-detective, and Tony was once the food supply of Henry Fitzroy, the four hundred and fifty year old

vampire. Tony has fought supernatural entities for years but never expected to fight them on television.

Last year on the set, he fought the Shadowlord who came from another dimension (see *Smoke and Shadows*) and the Shadows who the people on the set. Current filming is in Caulfield House, which comes alive closing them in and keeping outsiders from entering. Several murders/suicides keep replaying with the spirits trapped in endless reruns of what they did when they

were alive. The house feeds off of these scenes and wants the eighteen living people trapped inside to repeat the murder-suicide cycle in order to feed on the essence of the dying. Tony, who found out he was a wizard when he battled the Shadowlord, seeks a way to destroy this malevolence, otherwise he and all his companions will die over and over again in a dance that has no ending.

In *Smoke and Mirrors*, Fitzroy makes a cameo appearance, but it is Tony who has to develop his wizardly skills and become a leader if he is to defeat the evil of the Caulfield House. Over the course of seven books, Tony has changed from a street prostitute to a member of mainstream society. Not since *Hell House* has a haunted house horror story been so frightening.

Dead as a Doornail

Charlaine Harris



Ace, May 2005
\$22.95, Hardcover, 304 pp.
ISBN 0441012795

Review by Harriet Klausner

When the Japanese invented synthetic blood, the vampires came out of the closet and mankind had to learn to co-exist with another species. Sookie Stackhouse, cocktail waitress in Merlotte's Bar in Bon Temp, Louisiana, is thrilled because she

is a very strong telepath who cannot read a vampire's mind. (How can she? They're dead). After breaking off with her first lover vampire, Bill, and her second lover Eric magically forgets about their one night sexual extravaganza, Sookie vows to live a quiet life.

She finds she can't turn her back on the supernatural community because her brother Jason was bitten by a were-panther and on the nights of the full moon he changes. When that happens he spends his time in Hotshot a small shapeshifting community. When one of the Hotshot residents is killed and two other shifters are killed, the shape changers look towards Jason as the culprit because he was turned against his will. Sookie wants to find the shooter so her brother won't be killed but she has her hands full with amorous weres, sexy vampires and two fairies who watch over her because she keeps getting into dangerous situations.

Charlaine Harris has created a charming, beguiling and sometimes unsafe alternate Earth where the creatures of the night are both sexy and dangerous, sometimes at the same time. The heroine of *Dead As A Doornail* is a southern steel magnolia who has the spine to get a hazardous job done even if it means risking her own life. Sookie's world is never dull and she more in common with the supernatural beings than she does with her own kind.

RPG Corner (con't)

of a dearly developed villain, the GM may be called upon to play the mentor of the heroes, and celebrate and reward the heroes responsible for the villain's demise. How excruciating. I only go on like this to emphasize that the GM and the Player must come to the game for different reasons, and must have different definitions of fun as it applies to gaming. To do this weekly, monthly or whatever takes a special kind of endurance. To Players who read this column, I'd like you to come away with a sense of appreciation for what the your GM willingly does to himself, his characters, and his plots for your behalf; and for GMs who may be reading this, I want you to come away with my blessing to throw yourself into your villains! Make them nasty and smart and rotten all they way down to their tiny, black hearts. Have them squeeze the heroes till they squirm and squeal. Have them make the PCs beg for their lives at least once, declare that they will hunt this villain to the ends of the earth, and then have him shoot their dog. Enjoy their victories, but in the end, let the PCs defeat them, then come sit next to me in the Loser's Club. I have a whole bag of "I've been there," and some PEZ, and I'll gladly share both.

Filk (con't)

to befuddle his/her way through ten minutes of nonsensical dribble. There is nothing wrong with making mistakes, but having some familiarity with the song would be nice. Newer folk who may not understand the lax nature of filking and may never come back.

There is a filk *Hall of Fame* (Leslie Fish – first inductee to filk hall of fame) and the *Pegasus Awards* that highlight the accomplishments of filkers who have become known past their local affiliates. New talent comes forward all the time. I find them on BBS, websites, and word-of-mouth. Michael Hopcroft is one of the newer "multi-filkers". Why multi-filker? He has several sci-fi interests—he develops rpg/games and has his own gaming company, enjoys filking, recording and publishing. I'll highlight Michael and his music next month—a real, live Filker!

Finally, it stands to reason that Fandom who Filk find fulfillment and friendships flinging foul and fluffy fabricated or fundamental fodder and facilitating folk, for-no-good-reason, while free-basing funky and fuzzy future philosophy freely. Filking phenomenon—phew!

FIX-ation (con't)

5. **Reaching:** as with the use of *seem*, stating the obvious dilutes fiction.

In the novel I recently reviewed, characters constantly *reached*: they reached out; they reached in; they reached up (see #4). *Reach* alone is not the problem. The problem comes into play when writers mix *reach* with another verb that can stand on its own.

If you wrote: *Starr reached out and picked up her glass; Mitch reached over and stroked her face tenderly; Vic reached into his pocket and pulled out a blade.*

Try: *Starr picked up her glass; Mitch stroked her face tenderly; Vic pulled a blade from his pocket.* Being simple and direct will keep your story flowing.

6. **Almost:** another dirty word.

Rarely is *almost* needed: *Almost before she could turn, he grabbed her by the neck; She was almost afraid to open her eyes.* Why not: *Before she turned, he grabbed her neck; and She was afraid to open her eyes.*

Again, I speak quantitatively. Reducing instances rather than eliminating them will be effective. The novel I read probably had 50% of the action *seem* or *almost* take place.

Don't panic. The flaws I mention won't end your writing career – so long as they appear in early drafts. First drafts are for telling a story to yourself. Go ahead and get it down and don't fret over these errors at the outset. Naturally you'll write what you envision. Because you see the character reaching for the glass, you write it that way. That's fine. But once your novel or short story is on paper (notice I didn't say *down on paper*), comb through it to eliminate extraneous words tying knots in your tale.

7. **That:** not all *that* jazzy

The use of *that* can and should be significantly reduced. *The look that he saw on her face told him that she had forgiven him that transgression.* Oy! Remove the first two *that*'s. Better yet, simplify further: *Her expression told him he was forgiven.*

If you wrote, *It only made sense to her that there had been other women that had shared his bed in her absence*, try: *It made sense other women had shared his bed*, especially since we've just read all about 'her' return following a long absence and are already smack dab in the middle of a narrative clearly taking place in 'her' thoughts.

Streamlined books hold attention. There's more room left over for action if you don't spend page upon page telling readers what they already know. And unless

you're truly gifted at concocting the deliciously well-turned phrase, *simple* sells better.

8. **Multiple Modifiers:** pruning the weeds.

Too many adjectives choke the bloom from your fiction. Don't use two or three where one will suffice. Choose the best and ditch the rest.

All day long the hot sun had brutally beaten down upon the long narrow stretch of white sand abutting the edge of the azure ocean. Oy! OY! Why not: A brutal sun baked the narrow beach?

The gorgeous golden yellow of the setting sun appealed to her? Try something like: The golden sunset was gorgeous.

The darkly polished mahogany of the ornately carved bar added a sense of class and sophistication to Starr's well-appointed establishment? I don't think so. How about: The bar's polished mahogany implied sophistication.

Cut, cut, cut, cut, cut! Make every word matter by removing those that don't!

9. **Prepositional Phrases:** *Underoverinbelow* – it all becomes a blur.

Remember, at issue is reduction: eliminating the excesses making muddled melodrama of your mystery: *She reached out and felt around beneath the bar for the bottle of special fifty-year-old scotch that she had been saving for just such an occasion when her nerves were on edge and nothing else could be relied upon to calm her down.*

Go ahead. You try first. Then I'll tell you what I'd suggest. Ready? Have your edit done? Okay, then, here's mine: *Her nerves raw, she reached beneath the bar for her secret stash of valuable scotch.* Pretty much tells you everything you need to know using 60% fewer words.

Unless you want to pen the literary equivalent of a little old lady shuffling along in costume jewelry, pay attention. Your fiction can fly only if you slice the chords binding it to verbal ballast.

10. **Stated Emotions:** sow, don't yell.

The emotional seeds of any scene are planted in action and dialog. If you're repeatedly telling your readers, *Starr stormed angrily out the door and Starr seemed angry, and Starr felt a savage anger welling up from deep within her like a raging monster she could no longer control ... blah, blah, blah ...* then you, as the author, haven't done your job.

Character's emotions should resonate through their actions and words. Rarely will (adequate) authors

need to state outright that characters are angry, happy, relieved or scared. Let readers *feel* what your characters are feeling by drawing readers into the scene, a vast improvement over *telling* your readers six times in the same paragraph that people in your story are behaving angrily.

... **and finally** ... five closing tidbits

Watch for overuse of *just, still, really, only, slightly, own, and of* (particularly following *off*); please don't presume a dose of Shakespeare -- especially when irrelevant to the storyline -- automatically elevates the quality of your writing; copious use of *bitch, ass, butt, fuck* and words of similar ilk do *not* grace your fiction a modern swagger guaranteed to jettison you to the New York Times Best Sellers list; and please, *please* do me (and readers everywhere) a favor: if at any point in your story a character is hurt or recovering from injuries, don't spend six chapters telling us how much pain they are in every time they *reach out, move over, look up* or awaken violently from the thirty-fourth dream sequence you felt compelled to write -- obviously to torture us.

Hate mail intended for garrie keyman can be sent c/o *Who Axed Ya* to Jsolus@hotmail.com

The major distinction between fantasy and science fiction is, simply, that science fiction uses one, or a very, very few new postulates, and develops the rigidly consistent logical consequences of these limited postulates. Fantasy makes its rules as it goes along...The basic nature of fantasy is "The only rule is, make up a new rule any time you need one!" The basic rule of science fiction is "Set up a basic proposition--then develop its consistent, logical consequences."

John W. Campbell, Jr.
Introduction, *Analog* 6
Garden City, New York, 1966