



The Illuminata

Delving Deep Into The Worlds of Science Fiction and Fantasy

Right To Read; Read To Write

By Bret Funk

I've fallen into a trap I imagine most writers—those who don't make a living off their craft alone, at least—are forced to endure at one or more points. The demands of life have stolen much of the leisure time I once took for granted and turned writing into more of a fond memory than a dedicated hobby, let alone a second career. Increased work responsibilities and a longer commute eat away at the daylight hours. The everyday chores required to improve and maintain a household dig into the evenings and weekends. Two children who sleep light and wake up early lead to restless nights, and it puts stress on even a person renowned for how little sleep he needs. Family gatherings, trips to the store, and God forbid a few hours here and there to have some fun and visit with friends nibble at the carcass of free time. Writing and reading have fallen to the wayside, each taken in fits and starts, snippets snatched whenever circumstances allow, neither done with regularity or commitment.

I don't mean to imply that it's all bad, or that I have forsaken reading and writing unwillingly. That my son and daughter demand my constant attention

from the time they wake up until I leave for work (or from the time I get home until they fall asleep) makes me happy. The knowledge that in a few years' time they probably won't want anything to do with me makes me cherish each of these moments all the more. It also puts onto the back burner the guilt I feel at disappointing the dozen or so readers I've gained over the years.

But the fact remains that I miss writing, and that this column remains the only writing obligation I've forced myself to continue. Sometimes it seems like I've been gone so long that I've lost touch with my

characters, and in those instances when I do find a moment to write, half of the time is spent remembering what I was writing about. I've addressed that problem by thinking about my writing each night as I fall asleep, plotting and planning, fleshing out different storylines, working out various details and inconsistencies. The upshot is that I stay more focused on the work; the downside that it frustrates me more that I have no time to put those ideas to paper.

I miss reading too. Long hours—sometimes an entire day—curled up on the couch, living in someone else's imagination. The excitement when I figure out a plot point ahead of time. The disappointment when the author's path leads to a place less satisfying than the one concocted by my own mind. There is a liberation for me in reading fiction, but the only "reading" I do now is in my car on the commute, and I've never been fond of fiction books on tape. I am perhaps a bit more knowledgeable for all the lecture series and nonfiction books I've listened to, but a large part of me remains unsatisfied in a literary sense.

To combat this, I made adjustments to my lifestyle. I eliminated many of my other hobbies. I rarely play video games anymore. I only watch a couple of television shows with any regularity. I've even stopped watching movies for the most part (though that is often more a matter of fatigue and time investment than a lack of interest). Hardest of all, I attempted to shift from a morning writer (when I've always been more productive) to an evening writer, after the kids are asleep and my wife is readying herself for bed.

I intended to set up a regular writing schedule again, a half-hour to an hour at night, every night. I even succeeded to an extent. I was there every night. I turned off the email programs and web browsers. I started the word processor. I limbered up my fingers.

Problem was... nothing happened.

Oh, it wasn't writer's block, exactly. As I said, I'd been falling asleep with my mind on writing for months. I knew where I wanted to go; I just didn't know how to get there anymore. The ideas danced in front of me, but no presentation of them seemed appropriate. The imagery so vivid as I drifted off to slumber eluded me at the keyboard. Transitions were sloppy, descriptions bland. The passion and fire of the

In This Edition

**Right To Read;
Read To Write**

**University of Sci-Fi
Student Housing**

Artificial Intelligence

**The Writer's Block
Resonance**

REVIEWS

**Empire of Ivory
Cybermancy**

**The World Without Us
Once Bitten, Twice Shy
Star Wars: Death Star**

USF: Student Housing and Mating Rituals

by Terry Crotinger/montanasings

There is a curious similarity when it comes to USF housing options with other institutions of higher learning. And, it's rather simple really. *Like-minded*, *opposites attract*, or *Bohemian* students are on any university campus. Some things are universal.

The "any-campus" students with like-minded ideas and needs end up as groupies for their own club, often admiring their reflection in the choice of people asked to adopt their club's theme. It sounds harsh. There is a hierarchy with this kind of bedfellow. Fraternities and Sororities ooze this handpicked entitlement like bugs attracted to a bright light. They flame and burn out unless the environment is carefully controlled.

Likewise, the USF student clubs run a similar campaign to find acceptable manpower for their cause. Any good facilitator will have a preference for the people he/she wants to game, laugh/drink, snuggle with. Are they cooperative in a group setting? For gamers, is this a team effort or individuals out to keep their character in good standing (or in one case, how fast can he trash a character?). Will the GM's tires be slashed after it's all done for the week? Manners and polite society aren't a priority. They make their own Frat house, especially on game night, and plop down with their stuff and get comfy for the long term or until their welcome is no longer welcome. Some even stick around to clean up the mess.

The point: This group—any-campus or USF—changes players regularly and tend to be the younger crowd. The hard-core are bonded and happy for the short term. When the new semester begins, a new group, neophyte and nubile will parade through and the fun starts again. They room in pairs, rubbing noses like friendly Eskimos off campus, or in a dorm/Frat House setting, the USF student seems to gravitate to others of like-minded interests. Or not. Four months from now, a fresh busload will pull up again. Fresh blood; no moss on the rocks; good time had by all.

If he/she does not find bosom buddies, they can check out the other two groups, but this group leans to older-younger students. Housing options are more limited for the ones who strangely find the opposite viewpoint is interesting and even erotically/exotically attractive. What typifies this group is a dash of eccentric. Serious relationships may bloom here; seldom are both people science fiction fans to the same degree. USF students of any age may find satisfying relationships and roommates, but the interest may not stop at science fiction/speculative fiction topics. They

may drift together to discover common themes and leave the USF dorm for one on any-campus. Wherever there's a place to wash up, grab some grub and bed down for the night, they will come, if only just to be devil's advocate, explore new perspectives and problem solve—utilizing the experience to make them richer over all for a short while, or longer.

For the nomad/Bohemian fan of science fiction, anyplace is pretty much okay as long as people leave you and your stuff alone—short-short term. Some rare exceptions to this breed of fandom are the ones who are "sponsored", like musicians were centuries ago. These fans are given a place to stay with the expectation that the Sponsor will be entertained, either by wit, colorful commentary and companionship or at the least, some kind of inclusive behavior that allows the Sponsor to enjoy science fiction activities.

For example, NoFear—USF student who may and may not have a job and drifts from activity to activity—is known on campus for their involvement as an artist (gamer, technical, satirist, filker, charismatic) and just happens to be between housing options because of (wink) "financial difficulties". To fill a need in her life for more science fiction, Samantha Sponsor will invite NoFear to stay at her house. They may share expenses, or she may even allow NoFear to stay there for free *if* he shows her how to Game (insert USF activity here...). Somehow though, freedom seems to exact a price and NoFear is no stranger to paying for expenses in other ways...

Sponsor or student can abuse this arrangement; rarely is it permanently pleasing to both parties.

Some sponsors have no expectations and are nice people who understand that the Bohemian is down on their luck. For example, Sponsors often allow a Bohemian, someone they know and semi-trust, to share a hotel room at cons. By the end of the weekend, the sponsor discovers that the room he paid for with two beds slept twenty different people over the last three days and he doesn't know a single person, much less their names. When its time for the Sponsor to sack out, there is only floor space left; no blankets, no pillow. Like vagabonds of the Dust Bowl migration, word of a free flop spreads quickly and a kind Sponsor can quickly be taken advantage of. ("There will be an extra charge on your Visa card, Mr. Sponsor, for the missing lamp and pillows.")

Occasionally, University of Science Fiction students will find the love of their life and marry or become

Con't on page 8

In many science fiction stories, there are electromechanical devices, robots and computers who are at least as smart as human beings and sometimes smarter. But, what is the reality? Is it possible to build a machine that “thinks” as well or better than a human being? Or is this simply an impossible dream and will never happen? If artificial intelligence (abbreviated AI) is possible, how close are the computers of today towards that goal?

Like most questions of this sort, it depends upon the definition of artificial intelligence. There is no consensus even within the AI scientific community. Elaine Rich in her book, *Artificial Intelligence*, defines it this way: “Artificial intelligence is the study of how to make computers do things at which, at the moment, people are better.” One good example of something that fits this definition is chess playing. Once it was thought that people who played darn good chess were such geniuses that no machine could ever beat them. Perhaps they are. But in 1997 the supercomputer Deep Blue beat the world chess champion, Gary Kasparov. Nonetheless, chess aside, Gary Kasparov can do many things that Deep Blue cannot. A chess program can only do one thing well, and that is play chess. It is like an idiot savant.

A better definition of what we would expect from an AI is as follows: “Artificial intelligence is the part of computer science concerned with designing intelligent computer systems, that is, systems that exhibit the characteristics we associate with intelligence in human behavior.” This quote is from Avron Barr and Edward A. Feigenbaum’s book, *The Handbook of Artificial Intelligence*. But what are these characteristics? In the book, *Godel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid*, by Douglas R. Hofstadter, Hofstadter gives the following “essential abilities for intelligence” (by the way, I highly recommend this book, which is entertaining as well as informative):

- "To respond to situations very flexibly."
- "To make sense out of ambiguous or contradictory messages."
- "To recognize the relative importance of different elements of a situation."
- "To find similarities between situations despite differences which may separate them."
- "To draw distinctions between situations despite similarities which may link them."

The problem is that the abilities, such as those listed above, that are easy for human beings, are very

difficult to program into a computer. Nonetheless, progress has been made. Some areas of research where machine intelligence has come a long way are:

Expert Systems: Software designed to act as an expert in a particular area of expertise, for example, an income tax consultant. I happen to use one of these every year to do my taxes and believe me, it’s a lot better than trying to make sense of the U.S. Tax Code yourself.

Natural Language Processing: Software that understands and/or generates a natural language such as English. Translation software also fits into this category. I have more to say on this subject below.

Speech Recognition: Hardware and software that understands human speech. I’ve noticed that lately that many automatic phone answering services now use this technology.

Computer Vision: Hardware and software that can interpret visual images.

Robotics: A robot is a machine that can perform manual tasks that previously were performed by a human being, such as vacuuming a rug or assembling automobiles or dancing. I have Rhomba vacuum which does a tolerable job, but sometimes get stuck under low hung furniture.

Computer Assisted Instruction: Teaching machines. This was kind a fad for a while, but doesn’t seem to be used much anymore.

Automatic Programming: Software that can create other software.

Planning and Decision Support: Software that aids planning.

Expert Systems

“An expert system is a class of computer programs developed by researchers in artificial intelligence. In essence, they are made up of a set of rules that analyze information (usually supplied by the user of the system) about a specific class of problems, as well as provide analysis of the problem(s), and, depending upon their design, recommend a course of user action in order to implement corrections.”

Con’t on page 8

The Writer's Block: Resonance

by Charles Gramlich

In the past few years popular books have been published featuring Sigmund Freud, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Edgar Allan Poe, and H. P. Lovecraft as characters. A friend of mine, Laura Joh Rowland, will soon have a novel published with Charlotte Bronte as a character. Why have so many recent authors chosen to use historical individuals as characters in their stories? Why do such books often do well at the stores? I think the answer has to do, in part, with "resonance."

Resonance represents the degree to which a name or term or subject evokes already existing associations in a person's mind. You may not know many details about Freud but you recognize the name. It vibrates in your awareness; it has gravity.

Consider, you pick up a historical detective novel by an unknown writer. His detective is named Jonathan Carmichael. Right next to it is another unknown writer's book, but his historical detective is Edgar Allan Poe. Knowing nothing else about these writers or their books, I suspect you are more likely to plunk down your money for Poe than for Carmichael. Resonance is the reason. You are predisposed to select the Poe book because you already know something about the real Poe and, quite likely, you find him at least mildly interesting. Carmichael, on the other hand, is a void.

Some names carry a powerful resonance even when appearing separately from the historical figures who wore them. Consider "Abraham," or "Jesus." What personal and physical traits do you automatically assign to a character named Abraham? Wouldn't that name alone make you think of someone who is more intelligent and strong willed than if the character's name was Morris? Resonance gives "Abraham" power the moment his name is put on the page.

But the power of resonance can be negative, as well. Take "Adolph." I doubt you want to give your detective *that* name. Whether they realize it or not, most readers will be uncomfortable with a hero who carries the first name of Hitler. They will automatically and unconsciously associate that name with mass murder, concentration camps, and war.

Even completely fictional names can develop resonance, however. "Conan" has it. "Hannibal" has it. Even "Homer" has it. Did you think of Arnold Schwarzenegger, Hannibal Lecter, and Homer Simpson when I mentioned those names? Did you think of "muscles," "cannibals" and "Doh?"

The movie *Van Helsing* tried to capitalize on resonance by using a character who has appeared for

years in books and movies as Dracula's nemesis. Or consider the resonance in Dan Brown's megaseller, *The Da Vinci Code*. Leonard Da Vinci himself. Jesus. Mary Magdalene. And in addition to the historical people there is the Catholic church, the Vatican, Opus Dei, and Da Vinci's painting of "The Last Supper." These are all concepts that are rich in resonance, at least for many Americans.

I was talking with a writer friend of mine recently who mentioned how many thrillers have something about Nazis in them. Nazis, the Third Reich, and the swastika all have tremendous resonance, a resonance that is negative for most people but which still attracts their attention. My friend made sure to work Nazis into her latest manuscript.

General, all purpose words come with varying degrees of resonance themselves. What images and memories come to your mind when you hear or read nouns such as "blood," "snow," "death," "lover," or "child?" For me, "death" brings me my sister's skeletal face as she lay dying of cancer. And I hear the rattle of her last breaths. It makes me see my father's waxen pallor in a satin lined coffin, with rosary beads upon his chest. "Child" gives me images of my son, Joshua, bicycling, pitching, smiling.

Typically, concrete nouns, like "blood," "steel," "bone," have far more resonance than abstract ones like "humanist" or "misfortune." This means they make more powerful engines for your prose.

Some abstract nouns, like "freedom," or "violence," can develop a powerful resonance, but they are still different from concrete nouns in the specificity of the visions they will evoke. For example, what images appear in your mind when I say the word "wolf?" Probably something quite similar to those that develop in mine. But what about when I say "soul," or "liberty?" As a writer, I'm more likely to get my readers to *see* precisely what I want them to see when I use concrete nouns. On the other hand, if I want to evoke general emotions then..."let freedom ring."

Consciously or unconsciously, many writers have used resonance in naming their characters. Think of Mike Hammer or Sam Spade, or how many authors down through the years have named their characters some variation of "Cain." Unfortunately, this has been overused and I'm not sure you want to name your characters "Stone," or "Steele," or "Wolfe," or "Hawke" anymore. Here, resonance has been *lost* because of overuse.

Con't on page 9

Reviews

Empire of Ivory

Naomi Novak

Del Rey, Oct 2007, \$7.99

ISBN: 9780345496874

Review by Harriet Klausner

The war against Napoleon has turned bad for the English forces since a deadly disease has ravaged the dragon corps. Desperate to find a cure before they lose the aerial war, the English leadership learns the elixir may exist in Africa. As abolitionists protest the African slave trade and demand rights for dragons, British captain Will Laurence and his dragon Temeraire lead a band of warriors with the dragons across the Mediterranean to Africa.

However, the Dark wild continent is unwelcoming to the English as the natives know of the slave trade. Local dragons and their human cohorts go into combat mode to drive the English off the continent. Will and Temeraire know they will lose some friends in the skirmishes even as they struggle with their cause as they agree with the Africans that the slave trade is an abomination and dragons deserve rights as sentient beings.

The fourth Napoleonic fantasy (see *Throne of Jade*, *His Majesty's Dragon*, and *Black Power War*) is a fabulous refreshing entry as Naomi Novak takes her soaring champions to Africa where the English morality is questioned to the point that the heroic duet wonder if they fight for the wrong side. The battle scenes that include dragons at war seem genuine even with the mythos element. Filled with plenty of action, strong characterizations, and a fascinating locale, the key to this superior early nineteenth century epic remains the quest of human (and dragon) rights as the English run the slave trade and are the invaders claiming they bring a superior lifestyle to these uninformed pagans.

Science fiction reflects scientific thought; a fiction of things-to-come based on things-on-hand.

— Benjamin Appel

Cybermancy

Kelly McCullough

Ace, Oct 2007, \$6.99

ISBN: 9780441015382

Review by Harriet Klausner

Necessity created the magical web (mweb) in order to interconnect the infinite worlds of the multiverse as a means to keep chaos under control. Sorcerer Prince Ravirn of the house of Fate was chosen as the web administrator because of his superior hacker skills. However, as is his way, alienates his three great-aunts, the Fates (Clothos, Atropos, and Lachesis). Actually it was Lachesis who exiled her nephew and his best friend webgoblin-laptop Melchior from the family; while Clothos renamed him Raven of chaos.

Ravirn's (Don't call me Raven) girlfriend Cerice mourns the death of her webpixie-PDA Shara, who died saving her mistress; life. Making her grief insurmountable and driving Raven crazy is that Shara the PDA contained Cerice's doctorate in Computer Science. Thus her paper is on the other side of the River Styx with no way of retrieving it without trickery. Ravirn has a plan to fool his poker buddy Cerberus, the guardian of the underworld and hack into Lucifer's database to retrieve Shara. Ravirn succeeds, but the outcome proves different than he imagined. Instead of kisses, he finds the mweb is falling apart as if a worm is eating away one byte at a time and Lucifer is madder than hell that someone hacked into his computer. As his great-aunts predicted Ravirn has brought chaos into order and they fear that even worse he plans to fix his mistakes by deleting and rebooting the multiverse.

This zany mixing of computer technology with mythology is a cleverly designed satire in which the audience will have a great time following the antics of Ravirn in the mythological information age. The amusing story line spoofs American top secret paranoia as Ravirn hacks into Lucifer's protected database and abducts Shara from the other side while correcting his miscues with greater errors. Readers who appreciate something different will want to read this enjoyable insane sequel to the as much fun and crazy *Webmage*.

Reviews

The World Without Us

Alan Weisman

Thomas Dunne Books, 2007, 324 pgs.

ISBN-13: 978-0-312-34729-1

Review by D. L. Parker

When I was a child, growing up in the frozen northern half of British Columbia, my young parents made good use of a bare-metal, no-frills, minimally heated Land Rover to four-wheel-drive down countless abandoned logging roads. Some of these lead to sawmills or logging camps abandoned so long that their wooden frame structures had already fallen in, silent as tombstones before orange mountains of wood chips.

I was only about eight or nine years old when we came upon one such camp in late afternoon, abandoned on the shores of a quiet lake. The wind whistled gently through holes and gaps in the broken-down structures; on the sandy beach I walked upon, smelling the indescribable scent of the lake-water, a moose had come down to drink and left its broad tracks. Something in the cool sunlight, the wind, the eerie lack of human life among all the decaying works of its hands made so long ago, left me with a feeling I can remember as vividly as hallucination to this day.

Imagine, then, a world without human life. You, the ghost spirit, move over a planet that has only the works of our hands, no longer our living selves. What would this world be like? That is the provocative question that Alan Weisman poses.

Part of this question he answers by examining the world as it once was. The primeval world still exists in a few treasured places, such as Poland's *Puszcza* forest. How little man matters to an environment built upon the decay of vegetative matter and the occasional fall of a forest giant. Past geologic eras are also visited: he touches on the overwhelming rule of ice, a hundred thousand years at a time, with the brief interglacial periods such as we now know of an eye-blink twelve to twenty-eight thousand years.

But the past is no real guide to the future. Humanity has changed the planet in ways that

will not be easily undone. Plastics, for example: in the chapter *Polymers Are Forever*, Weisman touches on the vexing problem of the most ubiquitous material of the modern age. How long will plastics last? No one really knows for sure, but to quote the author, "polyethylene is not biodegradable in any practical time scale." Some beaches in the British Isles have proved to be 20% plastics, and the North Pacific Subtropical Gyre, a huge sump the size of Texas lying between Hawaii and California, is now, as the author calls it, the "Great Pacific Garbage Dump"... 90% of which is, of course, plastic. It's not diamonds that are forever.

Think New York City, that monstrous concrete archipelago, will last forever? The author breaks down just what will fail and when (as well as a disturbing treatise on the death of your house). What about nuclear power plants? If you live in Phoenix, Arizona, pray the electrical grid (and the sewage processing plants the cool the reactor) never fail. The description of what will inexorably happen to the biggest U. S. nuclear plant, the Palo Verde Generating Station north of the city, is enough to make you glad if you *aren't* around to see it.

In the meantime, take a look at what really happened in the Zone of Alienation, the 30-kilometer radius around Chernobyl's ground zero. Birds and animals are thriving... but breeding faster, and dying younger, than the same species outside. Is it Nature's way of fighting back?

This thought provoking book covers far too much ground to be addressed effectively in a one-page review. Although Weisman wastes little time speculating on what disaster could eliminate the human species, his speculations could apply equally well to far less catastrophic circumstances. If the power fails, the climate drastically changes, if the whole huge infrastructure we use to support our modern existence weakens and cracks like that neglected bridge in the Twin Cities, the very factors Weisman discusses in this book will come into play. They do not require our complete absence: only our lessening. Can any of us now say that cannot occur?

Reviews

It is something my nine-year-old brain dimly comprehended, that sunny, windy afternoon. The works we make today, like the rusting implements and falling-down structures of that ghostly mill, may be less permanent than the tracks of a moose on the sand. Truly, if our legacy is no more than physical flesh and its works, then *Ozymandias, thy name is Man*.

Once Bitten, Twice Shy

Jennifer Rardin

Orbit, Oct 2007, \$12.99

ISBN: 9780316020466

Review by Harriet Klausner

Jaz Parker left the Helsing elite team of vampire killers to become a CIA paranormal operative. She prefers to work alone as she trusts no one; the critical element for an assassin to stay alive.

However, two and a half century old Romanian expatriate Vayl the vampire wants Jasmine as his partner; anyone else would appreciate the honor of having the top CIA. paranormal agent as her cohort, but not her. Still she has no say except to agree to serve as an expendable bodyguard to the revered Vayl though she wonders why her as he is not telling. Vayl believes Jaz has some unique abilities including the skill to sniff out vampires. As they work in Miami investigating Assan, a plastic surgeon with ties to terrorists, she proves worthy when his blood supply is tainted, Jaz gives him her throat. Vayl knows that Jaz and he belong together beyond lead assassin and apprentice assassin; however, his ex-wife Liliana the vampiress with ties to Assan has plans for her former spouse that exclude Jaz, who must die.

This is a terrific contemporary paranormal CIA thriller starring two likable good guys and an assortment of nasty mortals and vampires. The counter terrorist story line is fast-paced with a chick lit bite as Jaz's in your face comments are fun to follow although she needs to be kept on decaf. Vayl is her mentor and much more and yet much less. Although Liliana and Assan show no redeeming qualities beyond perfect matches for Gonzo at Guantomino, fans of supernatural suspense thrillers will want to read *Once Bitten, Twice Shy*.

Star Wars: Death Star

Michael Reaves and Steve Perry

Del Rey, Oct 2007, \$25.95

ISBN: 9780345477422

Review by Harriet Klausner

Grand Moff Tarkin for three decades lobbied for the Death Star, a war vessel the size of a large moon, to be built. His dream comes to fruition as his killing ship with its special pandemic death weaponry is constructed in outer space in the Horuz Sector by residents of the nearby prison planet Despyre.

Lieutenant Commander Vil Dance is euphoric to be a fighter pilot on the Death Star. After her cantina burned down in Imperial City Memah Roothes and her bouncer Rodo open another one on the Death Star. Dr. Gli Divini has not been allowed to leave the service and when he is transferred to the Death Star, it is just another undesirable assignment to him. Political prisoner Teela Kaarz jumps at the chance to get off of Despyre and use her skills as an architect on Death Star. Master Chief Petty Officer Tenn Graneeet wants to be the one to use the largest laser in the known universe. Planet prisoner Ratua Dil, a Zelosiann is a con artist smuggler and who sneaks onto the Death Star and blends in with the crew. It is only after two worlds are annihilated that these crewmembers realize what they work on and want out; with the help of an archivist and a librarian they may be able to escape.

For those living on a far planet in a distant time, the Death Star is the massive starship that Luke and company destroyed in the original Star Wars movie. *Star Wars: Death Star* takes a look inside the humongous weapon of planetary destruction-ship at the crew and ordinary people living in something the size of a large moon. Readers will see first hand the normal everyday folks who make the Death Star work and their elation to be part of it turning to horror as worlds are destroyed by its weaponry. Cameo appearances by a who's who of the 1977 movie adds a sense of time and place to a fascinating character study of everyday

USF (con't)

Serious Partners. Having a love of science fiction as *the* bonding material for a relationship is surprisingly rare, though sex has always had a place in science fiction genre. As the couple gains time with each other and add children, finances and other responsibilities (job, time) eat at their ability to stay connected with fandom. It's not impossible to find a science fiction Family on campus, but it is uncommon.

For the non-attached-to-a-fandom-mate or orphaned fan of sci-fi... They drift in and out of USF activities, enjoying conventions, chat-rooms, Student Center and classes as life and time allows. They practice their art and interest alone, for whatever reason.

Humans need companionship and shelter. The same is true for USF students. May we *all* find our fix for Science Fiction! (And other fun activities with the Student Body :)

Next month wraps up University of Science Fiction studies and demographics with some parting thoughts and a look at what 2008 holds for fandom. (A new Star Trek movie and series is on the rise!?)

AI (con't)

I got this definition from Wikipedia in an article that gives a good introductory explanation of this branch of artificial intelligence. For a deeper understanding what is meant by an expert system, you may want to read the article. I'll try to summarize as briefly as I can.

The idea behind expert systems is to provide help usually provided by an expert in a particular field, such as software troubleshooting or diagnosing an illness in a medical patient. Three features of expert systems are rules of thumb, fuzzy logic and a database of solutions. When an expert in a field, such a physician, goes about solving a problem, such a determining what ails a patient, he or she usually has several rules-of-thumb that he or she uses. Depending upon the answers to key questions about the problem, the expert knows what the solution is by applying a rule of thumb. For example, suppose a patient complains about frequent severe headaches. After asking questions about the headaches and other accompanying symptoms and perhaps performing some tests, the doctor may determine that the person is suffering from migraines and prescribe pills. In expert systems, these rules of thumb are coded into the software.

Fuzzy logic is logic based on approximations rather than formal logic. It takes into account such vague statements as "almost," "nearly," and so forth, and manipulates them to come up with an approximate

AI (con't)

answer. For example, if a patient asks how much pain he or she is in and replies "not so much," this is considered less pain than "it hurts terribly." Certain conclusion may be drawn by which answer is given.

Expert systems also usually have large data bases which can be readily accessed using the rules of thumb and fuzzy logic.

Anyone who has gone to a software web site and used their self troubleshooting system has used an expert system. Computer and video games also use expert systems.

In my novel, *The Isaac Project* (available at Renaissance Pageturner Editions, <http://www.pageturnereditions.com>), the core software of the artificial intelligence being developed is an expert system.

Natural Language Processing

If you were going to design a humanoid robot, one of the most important abilities it must have is the ability to understand human speech, at least to the point where it could understand the commands you give it. It would also be nice if it would talk back to you. To be able to communicate with your computer in a normal conversational way would also be a good thing. You may have also noticed that lately, when you call certain businesses, you don't necessarily have to press buttons to enter information to their automated answering systems. Some allow you to speak the required information. All these artificial intelligence tasks fall under the province of natural language processing. Other tasks that require natural language processing are translation from one human language to another, transforming text to speech, answering questions, and retrieving information.

Natural language processing is the study and software development associated with the automatic generation and understanding of natural human languages. Natural language generation software converts information from computer data bases into normal human language. Natural language understanding software converts human language into forms that a computer can understand and manipulate.

One of the earliest systems, called SHRDLU, used a restricted world of blocks. It used a small restricted vocabulary to manipulate blocks of different shapes and sizes on a computer monitor screen. Because it worked extremely well, researchers were excessively optimistic about developing natural language software. However, it turned out that in the real world, language processing was much more difficult than supposed.

AI (con't)

Some of the problems are: Ambiguity. For example when it is not clear which word in a sentence an adjective or adverb is modifying. Some strings of words can be interpreted in many ways. In spoken words, sounds that represent successive letters blend into each other. Some written languages, such as Chinese and Thai, do not signal word boundaries. Most words have several meanings. The grammar for natural languages is ambiguous. Typing errors, speech irregularities and OCR errors. Some sentences don't literally mean what they say.

Many of these problems have been partially or wholly solved, but artificial intelligence experts still have a long way to go before you can have an intelligent conversation with your computer or friendly robot.

I note with interest the various web sites with talking heads called chatbots. I urge you to visit one of these sites to learn what a natural language artificial intelligence artifact can do. A popular one is called The ALICE Chatbot Foundation.

Writer's Block (con't)

Do consider, however, both the potential positive and negative resonance of names, places, things, and words in your fiction. What will people experience from your work if you name your female hero Heather rather than Rebecca? What will they feel if your characters live in New York? Or rural Alabama? What will they think if your character flies the Stars and Stripes prominently in their yard? How will they react differently to a character who is described with words that evoke sharks and snakes as opposed to lions and tigers?

Should you play *against* resonance and make *your* Heather a tough, resourceful cop rather than a bubble headed sorority girl? Should you let resonance work for you by describing your villain with words like "feral" and "wolfish?" There's no right or wrong answer. The decisions are up to you. Just give them some thought.

Resonance is a writer's tool just as much as punctuation and grammar. It can be misused, but sometimes it's the perfect tool for bringing out the hidden depths of your tale.

Right to Read (con't)

words was gone, and I didn't know how to get it back.

This went on for some weeks before I grew frustrated and gave up. Writing, I determined, would have to fall to the wayside for a while, until circumstances had changed enough that I could find my focus again. I considered writing an apology letter to the readers I know about, promising them more as soon as I could but offering no time frame, but I didn't have the heart.

Right to Read (con't)

I picked up a couple of novels that have been waiting for me, but their size proved too daunting. It took me months to read Robinson Crusoe (a book I would have once devoured in two days, max), and Defoe writes briskly compared to many of my favorite authors. Books safely back on the topmost shelf, tucked out of the way so they won't stare at me so accusingly, I grabbed a graphic novel given as a birthday present with the intention of leafing through a few pages as a distraction.

Something marvelous happened. The vivid artwork and unique perspective presented in the graphic novel fired my imagination, and I finished half of it in a single sitting. Comic books and graphic novels, long despised by many literary critics, offer a unique advantage over prose novels: they can be read faster. That's not to say that they offer less in the way of thought-provoking material or that they are in some way inferior. My inexpert opinion is that the visual elements of comics are processed in a different part of the brain than the literary elements, and that allows us to visualize the world differently (and perhaps more efficiently) than a true novel. Also, they are easier to stop and start, perfect for the man with a thousand distractions in his life.

The truly marvelous part came next. After I had set the comic book down, I found myself upstairs again, novel in hand. The size was no less daunting, but I now desired to face that challenge, and I broke open the cover. (I didn't make it far, but that's a different story.) In subsequent days, I alternated between graphic novels and bits of the regular novel, and I found that not only did my interest in each of those medium grow, but so did my desire to write.

I sat at the computer, and for the first time in a long while, I made good progress. It was only a page or two, but it felt right. The words came effortlessly. The picture in my head matched the description on the screen. And like any drug, I wanted more. More of each. More of both.

That's when I realized that for me—maybe for all of us—imagination can only truly inspire when it is inspired. For a long time I thought that I had to choose between reading and writing, and with time such a precious resource, writing almost always won. I understand now that I don't have a desire to read, I have a need. It's not a privilege, but a duty. A right. By accepting that, I have reawakened the writer inside me. I can no longer make time for one and not the other; they are two aspects of the same thing, and only by embracing both can I maintain the drive a writer needs to soldier on.

Now if I can just make my children sleep past 5:00AM.