Beyond the Idea

Roger Zelazny

Writers in general and science fiction writers in particular dislike the question, “Where do you get your ideas?” I have always felt that a far better question would be, “What do you do with your ideas after you get them?” but I have to acknowledge that I have learned some useful things from responses to the first one.

You see, I once asked someone where he got his ideas. You’d think I’d have known better, for I was already writing professionally at the time. I had heard the question dozens of times myself, and I knew that my own answers were seldom satisfactory. But, I told myself, this was a special situation. The man was neither a novelist nor a short story writer. He was a cartoonist, and I was impressed by his ability to come up with a fresh gag for every day of the week, every week of the year.

He smiled, he told me, I believed him, and I’ve gotten a lot of mileage out of his answer.

He informed me that he used the Yellow Pages of the telephone directory. For me, it was one of those moments when insight actually flashes. There was light. He was not kidding. He saw the Yellow Pages as a complete compendium of the goods and services available in modern society, and meditation on a few entries invariably stirred something in his mind in the way of a comment on the society that had engendered them. My own use of this routine has varied only to the extent that science fiction writers generally use the future as a means of talking about the present. Ergo, whenever I played the Yellow Pages game, I would project fifty years into the future the first half dozen or so entries to which I turned, and then I would ask myself just how that sort of business would be run a half-century from now.

I would make some guesses about what society might be like⁠—simple, straight-line, if-this-goes-on assumptions. Then I would try the “what if ?” variations; e.g., what if some of the customers (or employees) aren’t human⁠—are aliens, computer intelligences, dolphins... Finally, I would try shifting the business to another world, testing it in an even stranger setting. My story, “The Doors of His Face, the Lamps of His Mouth,” actually owed something to a bait-and-tackle ad.

Sure, it’s only a gimmick. It is also one of the best gimmicks I have ever come across, a technique capable of generating genuine story ideas. But so what? I come, finally, to my point: Ideas are not enough. Not for a story of any length.

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Science fiction has often been called a literature of ideas. I am not denying this. I am just returning to the question, “What do you do with your ideas after you get them?” The post-idea approach has grown steadily in importance for me for a couple of decades.

It was possible for Kingsley Amis to refer to much of the science fiction of forty years ago as literature in which the idea is the hero. Novelty, shock value, and spectacle were the substance of much early writing in the sf field: a description of weightlessness in outer space might occupy several pages; long discussions of the relativistic effects of high velocity interstellar travel might be in order; the paradox involved in traveling back through time and killing one’s ancestor might be detailed at great length. The characters involved in these situations could be stock figures. Who cared? The situations were intrinsically interesting.

But jokes are less funny the second or third time around. Much that was substance becomes convention, to be dealt with in a phrase or two such as, “We engaged the interstellar drive and jumped into hyperspace” or “We settled in for the generations-long cold sleep between the stars” (for those writers who don’t care much for hyperspace).

Ideas from the “softer” social sciences were brought into science fiction in the fifties, and the sixties saw the focus shift to story values themselves⁠—with greater attention to characterization and more sophisticated narrative techniques. From our present vantage point, the seventies could probably be viewed as a period of synthesis, when all of these things fused to produce a more mature literary form. At this time, the considerations involved in writing a science fiction story are the same as those for writing any other sort of story, with extra attention paid to all the things that make it science fiction.

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To discard any of the tools or to abandon any of the concerns we have acquired since the forties would be foolish. Science fiction is still a literature of ideas, but one generally needs more than an idea to make it work. A fresh and exceptionally clever idea could still carry a novel⁠—and certainly a short story⁠—on its own, invoking something of the imaginative power of earlier days, if that’s all that one cared to do... I am thinking here of top-of-the-line ideas, such as the planetary engineering of Larry Niven’s Ringworld, the wild biochips of Greg Bear’s Blood Music, the cyberspace of William Gibson’s Neuromancer, and the genetic engineering for an open-space culture in John McLoughlin’s Helix and the Sword. In each of these instances, the author has gone beyond concept and written a strong story with interesting characters.

One must always remember that today’s fresh and exceptionally clever ideas are already on their way to becoming tomorrow’s conventions, and the real staying power of the tale will be predicated upon story values as well as the ideas. Therefore, one must think about the special problems of settings and consider the unusual opportunities the area holds for character development when deciding what to do with one’s idea. I feel that the greatest difficulty, as well as one of the greatest challenges, in writing science fiction lies in settings. One cannot simply indicate New York, Paris, San Francisco with a few impressionistic strokes and get on with the action. Or, if one can, the problem will usually crop up someplace else. If it is a future setting, we must show what is different about it. If we are describing another planet, there is a lot of material to get across. If it is a parallel world or if the viewpoint character is a person whose vision runs on different wavelengths from the human norm, we have much to indicate. The problem obviously lies in detailing these things in a sufficiently interesting or at least acceptable fashion to hold the reader’s attention through what amounts to protracted exposition. For me, the best way of doing it usually involves dividing this material into several segments and slipping it in among passages involving action or fairly lively dialogue. Also, it can in part be used to bait the narrative hook. To choose two examples⁠—one science fiction and one fantasy⁠—from my bookshelves:

If a man walks in dressed like a hick and acting as if he owned the place, he’s a spaceman.

(Double Star, Robert A. Heinlein)

It was in that year when the fashion in cruelty demanded not only the crucifixion of peasant children, but a similar fate for their pets, that I first met Lucifer and was transported into Hell; for the Prince of Darkness wished to strike a bargain with me.

(The War Hound and the World’s Pain, Michael Moorcock)

Anything that can be made to serve a double purpose in narrative, also serves a third purpose: esthetics. If you can deal with more than one narrative necessity by means of a single statement⁠—say, background explanation plus characterization, or plot as well as setting⁠—you are streamlining your tale in the direction of elegance. Such economy is most valuable in a short story of any sort⁠—but in science fiction, where the burden of additional background is always present, it is a quality worth cultivating at any length.

...And then there is character. If setting is the burden of science fiction (though there is always someone like Jack Vance to turn it into a rare and peculiar virtue), then character is one of the rewards. Science fiction is the only area of modern prose in which characters of the sort Northrop Frye referred to as high mimetic mode (greater than one’s fellows) and mythic mode figures (greater than others and also greater than one’s environment) are still employed. In addition to the realistic or ironic characters who inhabit much of modern fiction, science fiction often has justifiable need for figures normally found in mythic literature or classical tragedy⁠—in the persons of aliens, mutants, androids, robots, sentient computers, cyborgs or individuals who are the products of genetic engineering. The range of character, I maintain, is greater in science fiction than anywhere else in fiction today.

It is possible to let your fingers do the walking and to come up with a neat little idea. However, I have always considered ideas a relatively cheap commodity. While some editors act as if the ideas are what they care most about, the cagier ones know that it is really the writing that they are buying.

If, therefore, you wish to toughen your writing for the long haul, practice clever ways of injecting background material, and consider the infinite aspects of character and the conflicts it might take to reveal something about it. The great new ideas will one day be a footnote to someone’s dissertation. The character, if you have done your job well, may be someone worth remembering.

Unfortunately, I have never found a Yellow Pages equivalent for character. For sound characterization, observation, introspection, and reading of good examples is the best preparation I can suggest. If you follow this counsel, I believe that one day you will find that your best ideas will emerge from the consideration of character rather than external influences.

Notes

Northrop Frye was a Canadian literary critic and author whose interest in mythology influenced Zelazny’s thoughts about writing.