Tomorrow Stuff

Roger Zelazny

It is always difficult to say why a writer writes. I do not know the thing it was that day, that irritated my psyche, that generated the peculiar compulsion-desire combination which resulted in my first story. I’ll call it my demon, say that I am still bedeviled, and let it go at that.

Why I generally write a particular type of material, however⁠—i.e., science fiction or fantasy⁠—is a question which I am in a better position to answer.

First, this is an area of literature where the writer has considerably more freedom than in other types of fiction. I enjoy descriptive writing, and it pleases me to be able to describe landscapes and meteorological phenomena which could not exist on Earth, but which might just be possible elsewhere; similarly, with characters and their motivations. For an example, I indulged my fancy in all of these things in my novelette, “The Keys To December,” which contained unmanlike humans engaged in an unusual project on a strange world. This provided an aesthetic pleasure of a sort that would not have obtained had I written a more “down-to-Earth” story.

There is also intellectual gratification in the exercising of these extra freedoms. The author may plan whatever future society he chooses to show precisely how he thinks it would function, given the factors upon which he bases it. In this fashion, he is free to explore whatever sociological or philosophical notions he wishes. Or, he may write an “If this goes on...” story, by projecting some facet of present society into the future and exploring its consequences when carried to an extreme.

Also, there is somewhat of an emotional satisfaction involved in exercising one’s god-complex in creating a world all by oneself, in fashioning it and populating it as one would, in working out its destinies, and even, perhaps, destroying it.

Second, there are economic reasons for writing science fiction. It is an area where a young writer of any talent will receive encouragement; and it is an easy area to “break into” and receive money while polishing one’s writing skills. One of the reasons for this is that, compared to other forms of writing, the competition is less keen. There is really only a small number of people in the world who write sf. There are good returns subsequent to an initial sale, also. A decent sf story stands the chance of being anthologized several times, with consequent foreign and paperback royalties, plus eventual inclusion in a collection of one’s own stories, with consequent foreign, etc. Along with this, it is a great boost to the ego to receive recognition at a science fiction fan-affair, and there is always the possibility of glory, for sf has its own triumphs, awards and trophies.

Third, there are certain similarities between science fiction, poetry and the visual arts, which⁠—while so with all of literature⁠—are especially striking here, and which exercise a particular appeal to some people such as me. The poet’s striving to produce fresh metaphors, and new and uniquely apt combinations of words is a thing akin to the sf writer’s efforts in creating new worlds. It represents a more intensely skewed angle of vision than is necessary in the bulk of modern writing, i.e. realism-naturalism. Likewise, and especially so in surrealism, expressionism and impressionism, there are some affinities with the visual arts. The representation of several ordinarily incongruous objects on the same plane of existence is a thing which happens constantly in sf, as are extraordinary transformations of the commonplace.

To summarize, then, freedom, money, and the attraction of the unique are the basic reasons I, and I daresay most, write sf.

Now, with respect to the area in general, one should know something of its history, traditions, levels of quality, in order to properly assess any given work or to lay personal plans for writing it. It must be borne in mind the sf has its roots in the U. S. pulp magazines of 20, 30, 40 years ago, and much of the early work was of pulp quality, i.e. hack writing. I feel that the collapse of the majority of those magazines in the early 1950s was a salubrious thing in that it caused many writers in the area to seek other outlets, with the resultant appearance of a lot of sf in paperback and even hardcover editions. These were less restrictive than the pulp magazines, and because of this the writers discovered that they could write of things, and write in such a fashion, as had earlier been verboten, because of editorial policies and taboos in the magazines. All of which leads to the point I now wish to make: Sf has passed through its adolescence and come into early adulthood now. The first major effect of this is that the quality of the writing and the nature of the themes being dealt with has advanced. There are better stories, more mature stories, appearing these days. The things one sees are no longer 98% space-opera.

The traditions I mentioned have not been abandoned, however. The four major notions which abounded in much early sf are with us still and they are things akin to the fact that people sing in an opera, rather than talking. Everybody knows and accepts this is the way it is done. So, with sf, you find the notions of faster-than-light travel, easy communication with alien creatures, time-travel, and the existence of and passage to parallel worlds, treated, in general, in a pretty casual fashion with a minimum of explanation as to the modus operandi involved. But once known, this is not so different from the fact that in a western story people ride horses, carry guns on their hips, and cattlemen hate sheepherders and people are often not too friendly with Mexicans and Indians. Of course this is an oversimplification, but it represents something of the stock of preconceived notions one must generally bring to a work of this genre. These things are with us, and they’re neither good nor bad, they’re just conventions⁠—that’s all.

There is an undeniably existential quality to sf, which constantly questions man’s fate, man’s place in the universe. An sf hero is generally a loner⁠—tough, smart, frequently quite introspective. He often winds up facing the entire world, and watching himself as he does so. Win or lose, he learns, he chooses.

The industrial revolution gave us sf. The genre began because of man’s fascination with gadgetry. The other major thing which informed the area was the fear of the dark, of the gods, of the things that prowl beyond the firelight, displaying only eyes. The gods and the devils and the machines got together to provide the afflatus. The early magazines provided the vehicle. The magazines’ letter columns provided a fandom which supported, promoted the genre. Now, with an impressive body of works and something of a tradition, sf thrives, independent of any single medium. It has proven sufficiently autonomous to survive the passing of most of the magazines.

Now we have entered into an age which, in one sense, is a catching-up phase. Literary devices, attitudes, tones, which were long ago explored at great length by Joyce, Kafka, Beckett, Ionesco, are just now finding their ways into sf because of the freedom I mentioned earlier. This can’t hurt any, for the more tools a craftsman has at his disposal, the better a product he is likely to put together. The immediate shock-value, however, in an area previously untouched by such experimentation, is significant. It has raised cries of decadence, narcissism, exhibitionism, phoniness. A few years from now, however, the area will have digested this, just as it happened in another time and another place. And we will be⁠—already are, actually⁠—enriched thereby.

These are my feelings about this moment in the lifeline of something I love.

Now, on the business, rather than the literary side of things, I believe it is also worth mention here, that for the first time in history, sf writers have formed and managed to maintain an organization dedicated to improving both the quality of work in the area and the writer’s lot in general. I speak of SFWA⁠—the Science Fiction Writers of America⁠—which has done much these past three years to assure the continuance and improvement of the genre. At present writing, I am secretary/treasurer of this organization and therefore I am in a position to observe that it would take a considerable catastrophe to destroy us. I think I can safely say that it will be a cold day in Hell when the world runs out of sf. This is because of the curiosity and the fear that gave us our sense of wonder, and because there are now enough of us possessing this heritage, enough of us so situated, that we will prophesy from here to eternity.

About my own writing, I have very little to say. That which moves me especially involves life and death, love and hate, the same as any other writer. My own idiosyncrasies, of course, make me what I am. What are my particular hang-ups and foibles? Immortality, suicide, one man against the winds and the tides and the stars, sometimes the impossible love which sustains, impossibly, the tortured soul, sometimes the hate so big that it would burn the innocent to reach the guilty, and sometimes the simple, contemplative pleasures⁠—like good food, friendly cats, a pipe of pleasant tobacco⁠—that make life worthwhile, despite all ugliness, and then again, the things, sometimes bawdy, sometimes simple that make me laugh.

I don’t know how I hang particular items on these hooks and make stories out of them...a stone, a leaf, a door...you have the routine list. Anything might supply the initial stimulation, and then my demon takes over and starts devilling me until it’s all down on paper. I’ve a very visual type imagination. I see everything that happens⁠—even dream about it, occasionally⁠—while I’m working on a story. Whether this is good or bad, I don’t know. It’s just the way things are with me.

If I were in the process of counseling a would-be sf writer, I would say to him, “you need a sense of humor and a sense of place. You need a sense of history and a sense of time. You need a sense of science and a sense of the human condition. You need a sense of the fear, shame and mocking laughter, which for want of a better word I’ll call the guilt involved in being a man. But most of all, you need a sense of humor.” And assuming that the guy knows how to put words together at all, I think he’ll probably make it on the scene, along with the rest of us priests of the absurd, time-keepers of the never-to-be-calendared occasion.

Notes

In this 1968 essay Zelazny described the history of science fiction and the impact that he and other new writers had on the field. He described how they brought into sf techniques and mature themes that mainstream writers like James Joyce, Franz Kafka, and others had tried. Before these new writers arrived, space opera had dominated the field. Zelazny deplored the term “New Wave,” however.

Irish writer James Joyce experimented with stream of consciousness and other techniques; Ulysses and Finnegans Wake are two of his best known works. German author Franz Kafka wrote surrealistic novels such as The Trial and The Judgement. Irish Nobel laureate Samuel Beckett wrote Absurd plays, including Waiting for Godot and Krapp’s Last Tape. Ionesco was a Romanian-born French Absurd playwright whose works included The Bald Soprano and Rhinoceros.