## Constructing a Science Fiction Novel

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Sylvia Burack asked me for an essay for The Writer, and I did the following piece. A large chunk of it tells of the considerations which went into the composition of my novel Eye of Cat. I don’t believe I’ve ever recorded the things I do and think in writing a book in such detail, before or since. Still, it’s a short piece, and for those of you who care about such matters I am including it here.

The late James Blish was once asked where he got his ideas for science fiction stories. He gave one \_ of the usual general answers we all do—from observation, from reading, from the sum total of all his experiences, et cetera. Then someone asked him what he did if no ideas were forthcoming from these. He immediately replied, “I plagiarize myself.”

He meant, of course, that he looked over his earlier works for roads unfollowed, trusting in the persistence of concerns and the renewal of old fascinations to stimulate some new ideas. And this works. I’ve tried it occasionally, and I usually find my mind flooded.

But I’ve been writing for over twenty years, and I know something about how my mind works when I am seeking a story or telling one. I did not always know the things that I know now, and much of my earlier writing involved groping—defining themes, deciding how I really felt about people and ideas. Consequently, much of this basic thinking accomplished, it is easier for me to fit myself into the driver’s seat of a fresh new story than it once was. It may be the latest model, but the steering is similar, and once I locate the gearshift I know what to do with it.

For example: Settings. For me, science fiction has always represented the rational—the extension into a future or alien environment of that which is known now—whereas fantasy represented the metaphysical—the introduction of the unknown, usually into an alien environment. The distinctions are sometimes blurred, and sometimes it is fun to blur them. But on a practical, working level, this generally is how I distinguish the two. Either sort of story (I never tire of repeating) has the same requirements as a piece of general fiction, with the added necessity of introducing that exotic environment. Of the three basic elements of any fiction—plot, character, and setting—it is the setting that requires extra attention in science fiction and fantasy.

Here, as nowhere else, one walks a tightrope between overexplaining and overassuming, between boring the reader with too many details and losing the reader by not providing enough.

I found this difficult at first. I learned it by striving for economy of statement, by getting the story moving quickly and then introducing the background piecemeal. Somewhere along the line I realized that doing this properly could solve two problems: The simple exposition of the material could, if measured out in just the right doses, become an additional means of raising reader interest. I employed this technique to an extreme in the opening to my story “Unicorn Variation,” in which I postponed for several pages describing the unusual creature passing through a strange locale.

A bizarrerie of fires, cunabulum of light, it moved with a deft, almost dainty deliberation, phasing into and out of existence like a storm-shot piece of evening; or perhaps the darkness between the flares was more akin to its truest nature—swirl of black ashes assembled in prancing cadence to the lowing note of desert wind down the arroyo behind buildings as empty yet filled as the pages of unread books or stillnesses between the notes of a song.

As you see, I was careful to tell just enough to keep the reader curious. By the time it became apparent that it was a unicorn in a New Mexico ghost town, I had already introduced another character and a conflict.

Characters are less of a problem for me than settings. People are usually still people in science fiction environments. Major figures tend to occur to me almost fully developed, and minor ones do not require much work. As for their physical descriptions, it is easy at first to over-describe. But how much does the reader really need? How much can the mind take in at one gulp? See the character entirely but mention only three things, I decided. Then quit and get on with the story. If a fourth characteristic sneaks in easily, okay. But leave it at that initially. No more. Trust that other features will occur as needed, so long as you know. “He was a tall, red-faced kid with one shoulder lower than the other.” Were he a tall, red-faced kid with bright blue eyes (or large-knuckled hands or storms of freckles upon his cheeks) with one shoulder lower than the other, he would actually go out of focus a bit rather than grow clearer in the mind’s eye. Too much detail creates a sensory overload, impairing the reader’s ability to visualize. If such additional details are really necessary for the story line itself, it would be better to provide another dose later on, after allowing time for the first to sink in. “Yeah,” he replied, blue eyes flashing.

I’ve mentioned settings and characters as typical examples of the development of writing reflexes, because reflexes are what this sort of work becomes with practice— and then, after a time, it should become second nature and be dismissed from thought. For this is just apprentice work—tricks—things that everybody in the trade has to learn. It is not, I feel, what writing is all about.

The important thing for me is the development and refinement of one’s perception of the world, the experimentation with viewpoints. This lies at the heart of storytelling, and all of the mechanical techniques one learns are merely tools. It is the writer’s approach to material that makes a story unique.

For example, I have lived in the Southwest for nearly a decade now. At some point I became interested in Indians. I began attending festivals and dances, reading anthropology, attending lectures, visiting museums. I became acquainted with Indians. At first, my interest was governed only by the desire to know more than I did. Later, though, I began to feel that a story was taking shape at some lower level of my consciousness. I waited. I continued to acquire information and experience in the area.

One day my focus narrowed to the Navajo. Later, I realized that if I could determine why my interest had suddenly taken this direction, I would have a story. This came about when I discovered the fact that the Navajo had developed their own words—several hundred of them— for naming the various parts of the internal combustion engine. It was not the same with other Indian tribes I knew of. When introduced to cars, other tribes had simply taken to using the Anglo words for carburetors, pistons, spark plugs, etc. But the Navajo had actually come up with new Navajo words for these items—a sign, as I saw it, of their independence and their adaptability.

I looked further. The Hopis and the Pueblo Indians, neighbors to the Navajo, had rain dances in their rituals. The Navajo made no great effort to control the weather in this fashion. Instead, they adapted to rain or drought.

Adaptability. That was it. It became the theme of my novel. Suppose, I asked myself, I were to take a contemporary Navajo and by means of the time-dilation effects of space travel coupled with life extension treatments, I saw to it that he was still alive and in fairly good shape, say, one hundred seventy years from now? There would, of necessity, be gaps in his history during the time he was away, a period in which a lot of changes would have occurred here on Earth. That was how the idea for Eye of Cat came to me.

But an idea is not a science fiction novel. How do you turn it into one?

I asked myself why he would have been away so frequently. Suppose he’d been a really fine tracker and hunter? I wondered. Then he could have been a logical choice as a collector of alien-life specimens. That rang true, so I took it from there. A problem involving a nasty alien being could serve as a reason for bringing my Navajo character out of retirement and provide the basis for a conflict.

I also wanted something representing his past and the Navajo traditions, something more than just his wilderness abilities—some things he had turned his back on. Navajo legend provided me with the chindi, an evil spirit I could set to bedeviling him. It occurred to me then that this evil spirit could be made to correspond with some unusual creature he himself had brought to Earth a long time ago.

That was the rough idea. Though not a complete plot summary, this will show how the story took form, beginning with a simple observation and leading to the creation of a character and a situation. This small segment of the story would come under the heading of “inspiration”; most of the rest involved the application of reasoning to what the imagination had so far provided.

This required some tricky considerations. I firmly believe that I could write the same story—effectively—in dozens of different ways: as a comedy, as a tragedy, as something in between; from a minor character’s point of view, in the first person, in the third, in a different tense, et cetera. But I also believe that for a particular piece of fiction, there is one way to proceed that is better than any of the others. I feel that the material should dictate the form. Making it do this properly is for me the most difficult and rewarding part of the storytelling act. It goes beyond all of the reflex tricks, into the area of aesthetics.

So I had to determine what approach would best produce the tone that I wished to achieve. This, of course, required clarifying my own feelings.

My protagonist, Billy Blackhorse Singer, though born into a near-neolithic environment, later received an advanced formal education. That alone was enough to create some conflicts within him. One may reject one’s past or try to accommodate to it. Bill rejected quite a bit. He was a very capable man, but he was overwhelmed. I decided to give him an opportunity to come to terms with everything in his life.

I saw that this was going to be a novel of character. Showing a character as complex as Billy’s would require some doing. His early life was involved with the myths, legends, shamanism of his people, and since this background was still a strong element in his character, I tried to show this by interspersing in the narrative my paraphrases of different sections of the Navajo creation myth and other appropriate legendary material. I decided to do some of this as poetry, some original, some only loosely based on traditional materials. This, I hoped, would give the book some flavor as well as help to shape my character.

The problem of injecting the futuristic background material was heightened, because I was already burdening the narrative with the intermittent doses of Indian material. I needed to find a way to encapsulate and abbreviate, so I stole a trick from Dos Passos’s U.S.A. trilogy. I introduced “Disk” sections, analogous to his “Newsreel” and “Camera Eye” sequences—a few pages here and there made up of headlines, news reports, snatches of popular songs, to give the flavor of the times. This device served to get in a lot of background without slowing the pace, and its odd format was almost certain to be sufficiently interesting visually to arouse the reader’s curiosity.

The evolving plot required the introduction of a half dozen secondary characters—and not just minor ones whom I might bring in as completely stock figures. Pausing to do full-scale portraits of each—by means of long flashbacks, say—could be fatal to the narrative, however, as they were scheduled to appear just as the story was picking up in pace. So I took a chance and broke a major writing rule.

Almost every book you read about writing will say, “Show. Don’t tell.” That is, you do not simply tell the reader what a character is like; you demonstrate it, because telling will generally produce a distancing effect and arouse a ho-hum response in the reader. There is little reader identification, little empathy created in merely telling about people.

I decided that not only was I going to tell the reader what each character was like, I was going to try to make it an interesting reading experience. In fact, I had to.

If you are going to break a rule, capitalize on it. Do it big. Exploit it. Turn it into a virtue.

I captioned a section with each character’s name, followed the name with a comma and wrote one long, complex, character-describing sentence, breaking its various clauses and phrases into separate lines, so that it was strung out to give the appearance of a Whitmanesque piece of poetry. As with my “Disk” sections, I wanted to make this sufficiently interesting visually to pull the reader through what was, actually, straight exposition.

Another problem in the book arose when a number of telepaths used their unusual communicative abilities to form temporarily a composite or mass-mind. There were points at which I had to show this mind in operation. Finnegans Wake occurred to me as a good model for the stream of consciousness I wanted to use for this. And Anthony Burgess’s Joysprick, which I’d recently read, had contained a section that could be taken as a primer for writing in this fashion. I followed.

Then, for purposes of achieving verisimilitude, I traveled through Canyon de Chelly with a Navajo guide. As I wrote the portions of the book set in the Canyon, I had before me, along with my memories, a map, my photographs, and archaeological descriptions of the route Billy followed. This use of realism, I hoped, would help to achieve some balance against the impressionism and radical storytelling techniques I had employed elsewhere.

These were some of the problems I faced in writing Eye of Cat and some of the solutions I used to deal with them. Thematically, though, many of the questions I asked myself and many of the ideas I considered were things that had been with me all along; only the technical solutions and the story’s resolution were different this time. In this respect, I was, at one level, still plagiarizing my earlier self. Nothing wrong with that, if some growth has occurred in the meantime.

From everything I’ve said, it may sound as if the novel was wildly experimental. It wasn’t. The general theme was timeless—a consideration of change and adjustment, of growth. While science fiction often deals with the future and bears exotic trappings, its real, deep considerations involve human nature, which has been the same for a long time and which, I believe, will continue much as it is for an even longer time. So in one sense we constantly seek new ways to say old things. But human nature is a generality. The individual does change, does adapt, and this applies to the writer as well as to the characters. And it is in these changes—in self-consciousness, perception, sensibility—that I feel the strongest, most valid stories have their source, whatever the devices most suitable for their telling.