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# THE CRAFT OF WRITING SCIENCE FICTION THAT SELLS

BEN BOVA  
Author of Mars and Millenium

This book is based on *Notes to a Science Fiction Writer*, © 1975 and 1981 by Ben Bova

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To Barbara and Bill, two of the most persistent people I know.

I shall always feel respected for every one who has written a book,  
let it be what it may, for I had no idea of the trouble,  
which trying to write common English could cost one.  
?I Charles Darwin

## *Chapter One*

# How to Get Out of the Slushpile

*All good books are alike in that they are truer than if they had really happened and after you are finished reading one you will feel that a that happened to you and afterwards it all belongs to you; the goo and the bad, the ecstasy, the remorse and sorrow, the people and the places and how the weather was. If you can get so that you can give that to people, then you are a writer.*

?áErnest Hemingway

All my life I have been a writer.

Well, almost. As far back as I can remember I was writing stories or telling them to friends and family. When I was in junior high school I created a comic strip? strictly for myself; I had no thought of trying to publish it. And I enjoyed reading, enjoyed it immensely. Back in those days, when I was borrowing all the books I was allowed to from the South Philadelphia branch of the Free Library of Philadelphia, I had no way of knowing that every career in writing begin with a love of reading.

It was in South Philadelphia High School for Boys (back in those sexually segregated days) that I encountered Mr. George Paravicini, the tenth-grade English teacher and faculty advisor for the school newspaper, *The Southron*. Under his patient guidance, I worked on the paper and began to write fiction,

as well.

Upon graduation from high school in 1949, the group of us who had produced the school paper for three years and published a spiffy yearbook for our graduating class decided that we would go into the magazine business. We created the nation's first magazine for teenagers, *Campus Town*. It was a huge success and a total failure. We published three issues, they were all immediate sellouts, yet somehow we went broke. That convinced us that we probably needed to know more than we did, and we went our separate ways to college.

While I was a staff editor of *Campus Town* I had my first fiction published. I wrote a short story for each of those three issues. I also had a story accepted by another Philadelphia magazine, for the princely payment of five dollars, but the magazine went bankrupt before they could publish it.

I worked my way through Temple University, getting a degree in journalism in 1954, then took a reporter's job on a suburban Philadelphia weekly newspaper, *The Upper Darby News*.

I was still writing fiction, but without much success. Like most fledgling writers, I had to work at a nine-to-five job to buy groceries and pay the rent. I moved from newspapers to aerospace and actually worked on the first U.S. space project, Vanguard, two years before the creation of NASA. Eventually, I became manager of marketing for a high-powered research lab in Massachusetts, the Avco Everett Research Laboratory. In that role I set up the first top-secret meeting in the Pentagon to inform the Department of Defense that we had invented high-power lasers. That was in 1966, and it was the beginning of what is now called the Strategic Defense Initiative, or Star Wars.

My first novel was published in 1959, and I began to have some success as a writer, although still not enough success to leave Avco and become a full-time writer. By then I had a wife and two children.

I became an editor by accident. John W. Campbell, the most powerful and influential editor in the science fiction field, died unexpectedly. I was asked to take his place as editor of *Analog Science Fiction-Science Fact* magazine, at that time (1971) the top magazine in the SF field. I spent the next eleven years in New York City, as editor of *Analog* and, later, *Omni* magazine.

In 1982 I left magazine editing. I have been a full-time writer and occasional lecturer ever since. I have written more than eighty fiction and nonfiction books, a hatful of short stories, and hundreds of articles, reviews and opinion pieces.

## THE SLUSHPILE

When I was an editor of fiction, every week I received some fifty to a hundred story manuscripts from men and women who had never submitted a piece of fiction before. The manuscripts stacked up on my desk daily and formed what is known in the publishing business as "the slushpile." Every new writer starts in the slushpile. Most writers never get out of it. They simply get tired of receiving rejections and eventually quit writing.

At both *Analog* and *Omni* I personally read all the incoming manuscripts. There were no first readers, no assistant readers. The editor read everything. It made for some very long days. And nights. Long?• and frustrating. Because in story after story I saw the same basic mistakes being made, the same fundamentals of storytelling being ignored. Stories that began with good

ideas or that had stretches of good writing in them would fall apart and become unpublishable simply because the writer had overlooked? or never knew? the basic principles of storytelling.

There are good ways and poor ways to build a story, just as there are good ways and poor ways to build a house. If the writer does not use good techniques, the story will collapse, just as when a builder uses poor techniques his building collapses.

Every writer must bring three major factors to each story that he writes. They are ideas, artistry and craftsmanship.

*Ideas* will be discussed later in this book; suffice it to say for now that they are nowhere as difficult to find and develop as most new writers fear.

*Artistry* depends on the individual writer's talent and commitment to writing. No one can teach artistry to a writer, although many have tried. Artistry depends almost entirely on what is inside the writer: innate talent, heart, guts and drive.

*Craftsmanship* can be taught, and it is the one area where new writers consistently fall short. In most cases it is simple lack of craftsmanship that prevents a writer from leaving the slushpile. Like a carpenter who has never learned to drive nails straight, writers who have not learned craftsmanship will get nothing but pain for their efforts. That is why I have written this book: to help new writers learn a few things about the craftsmanship that goes into successful stories.

## THE PLAN OF THIS BOOK

The plan of this book is straightforward. I assume that you want to write publishable fiction, either short stories or novels. I will speak directly to you, just as if we were sitting together in my home discussing craftsmanship face to face.

First, we will talk about science fiction, its special requirements, its special satisfactions. The science fiction field is demanding, but it is the best place for new writers to begin their careers. It is vital, exciting, and offers a close and immediate interaction between readers and writers.

In the next section of the book we will talk about the four main aspects of fiction writing: character, background, conflict and plot. Four short stories of mine will serve as models to illustrate the points we discuss. There are myriads of better and more popular stories to use as examples, of course. I use four of my own because I know exactly how and why they came to be written, what problems they presented to the writer, when they were published, where they met my expectations, and where they failed.

Each of these four areas of study? character, background, conflict and plot? is divided into three parts. The section begins with the chapter "Character: Theory." After it, is the short story that serves as an example, followed by the chapter "Character: Practice," showing how the theoretical ideas were handled in the actual story. Then come chapters on background, conflict and plot: theory first, then a short story, followed by a chapter on practice using the story as an illustration.

Next will come a section specifically about writing novels. We will discuss the different demands that novels make on the writer and how successful novelists have met these challenges. We will deal with the things you need to do before you write a novel, and then the actual writing task. The next

chapter, on marketing, will discuss how to go about selling your work, both novels and short fiction.

Finally, there will be a wrap-up section in which we discuss ideas, style, and a few other things.

#### WHAT THIS BOOK IS NOT

This book is not an exhaustive text on the techniques of writing. I assume that you know how to construct an English sentence and how to put sentences together into readable paragraphs. We will not spend a chapter, or even a few pages, discussing the importance of using strong verbs or the active versus the passive voice or the proper use of adjectives and adverbs. All these things you should have acquired in high school English classes. If you don't understand them now, go back and learn them before going any further.

There are many graduates of high school and college courses in creative writing who have been taught how to write lovely paragraphs, but who have never learned how to construct a story. Creative writing courses hardly ever teach story construction. This book deals with construction techniques. It is intended as a practical guide for those who want to write commercial fiction and sell it to magazine and book editors.

We will concentrate on the craft of writing, on the techniques of telling a story in print. Some critics may consider this too simple, too mechanistic, for aspiring writers to care about. But, as I said earlier, it is the poor craftsmanship of most stories that prevents them from being published.

Good story-writing certainly has a mechanical side to it. You cannot get readers interested in a wandering, pointless tale any more than you can get someone to buy a house that has no roof.

Since the time when storytelling began, probably back in the Ice Ages, people have developed workable, usable, successful techniques for telling their tales. Storytellers use those techniques today, whether they are sitting around a campfire or in a Hollywood office. The techniques have changed very little over the centuries because the human brain has not changed. We still receive information and assimilate it in our minds in the same way our ancestors did. Our basic neural wiring has not changed, so the techniques of storytelling, of putting information into that human neural wiring, are basically unchanged.

Homer used these techniques. So did Goethe and Shakespeare.

And so will you, if and when you become a successful storyteller. I hope this book will help you along that path.

*Chapter Two*

## Science Fiction

*If science fiction is escapist, it's escape into reality.*

*?álsaac A,simov*

This book is basically about science fiction writing, although the techniques for writing science fiction can be used for any kind of fiction writing.

There are three main reasons for concentrating on science fiction, but before I enumerate them I should define exactly what I mean by *science fiction*.

#### DEFINITION

Science fiction stories are those in which some aspect of future science or high technology is so integral to the story that, if you take away the science or technology, the story collapses.

Think of *Frankenstein*. Take the scientific element out of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's novel and what is left? A failed medical student and not much more.

You may be surprised to realize that most of the books and magazine stories published under the science fiction rubric fail to meet this criterion. The science fiction category is very broad: it includes fantasy, horror, and speculative tales of the future in which science plays little or no part at all.

From here on, when I say science fiction, I mean stories that meet the definition given above. Other areas of the field I will call SF. The term *sci-fi*, which most science fiction writers loathe, I will reserve for those motion pictures that claim to be science fiction but are actually based on comic strips. Or worse.

#### THREE REASONS

The three reasons this book concentrates on science fiction story-writing are:

1. In today's commercial fiction market, SF is one of the few areas open to new writers, whether they are writing short stories or novels. Mysteries, gothics, romances, and other categories of commercial fiction are much more limited and specialized, especially for the short-story writer, but SF is as wide open as the infinite heavens. SF magazines actively seek new writers, and SF books consistently account for roughly 10 percent of the fiction books published each year in the United States. The SF community is quick to recognize new talent.

2. Science fiction presents to a writer challenges and problems that cannot be found in other forms of fiction. In addition to all the usual problems of writing, science fiction stories must also have strong and believable scientific or technical backgrounds. Isaac Asimov often declared that writing science fiction was more difficult than any other kind of writing. He should have known; he wrote everything from mysteries to learned tomes on the Bible and Shakespeare. If you can handle science fiction skillfully, chances are you will be able to write other types of fiction or nonfiction with ease.

3. Science fiction is the field in which I have done most of my work, both as a writer and an editor. Although most of my novels are written for the general audience, since they almost always deal with scientists and high technology they are usually marketed under the SF category. My eleven years as a magazine editor at *Analog* and *Omni* were strictly within the science fiction field, and I won six Science Fiction Achievement Awards (called the Hugo) for Best Professional Editor during that time.

## THE LITERATURE OF IDEAS

Science fiction has become known as “the literature of ideas,” so much so that some critics have disparagingly pointed out that many SF stories have The Idea as their hero, with very little else to recommend them. Ideas are important in science fiction. They are a necessary ingredient of any good SF tale. But the ideas themselves should not be the be-all and end-all of every story. (Ideas and idea-generation are discussed in chapter nineteen.)

Very often it is the idea content of good science fiction that attracts new writers to this exciting yet demanding field. (And please note that new writers are not necessarily youngsters; many men and women turn to writing fiction after establishing successful careers in other fields.) Science fiction’s sense of wonder attracts new writers. And why not? Look at the playground they have for themselves! There’s the entire universe of stars and galaxies, and all of the past, present, and future to write about. Science fiction stories can be set anywhere and anytime. There’s interstellar flight, time travel, immortality, genetic engineering, nanotechnology, behavior control, telepathy and other types of extrasensory perception (ESP), colonies in space, new technologies, explorations of the vast cosmos or the inner landscapes of the mind.

John W. Campbell, most influential of all science fiction editors, fondly compared science fiction to other forms of literature in this way: He would spread his arms wide (and he had long arms) and declaim, “This is science fiction! All the universe, past, present and future.” Then he would hold up a thumb and forefinger about half an inch apart and say, “This is all the other kinds of fiction.”

All the other kinds of fiction restrict themselves to the here-and-now, or to the known past. All other forms of fiction are set here on Earth, under a sky that is blue and ground that is solid beneath your feet. Science fiction deals with all of creation, of which our Earth and our time are merely a small part. Science fiction can vault far into the future or deep into the past.

But even more fascinating for the writer (and the reader) of science fiction is the way these ideas can be used to develop stories about people. That is what fiction is about? People. In science fiction, some of the “people” may not look very human; they may be alien creatures or intelligent robots or sentient sequoia trees. They may live on strange, wild, exotic worlds. Yet they will always face incredible problems and strive to surmount them. Sometimes they will win, sometimes lose. But they will always strive, because at the core of every good science fiction story is the very fundamental faith that we can use our own intelligence to understand the universe and solve our problems.

All those weird backgrounds and fantastic ideas, all those special ingredients of science fiction, are a set of tricks that writers use to place their characters in the desperate situations where they will have to do their very best, or their very worst, to survive. For fiction is an examination of the human spirit, placing that spirit in a crucible where we can test its true worth. In science fiction we can go far beyond the boundaries of the here-and-now to put that crucible any place and any time we want to, and make the testing fire as hot as can be imagined.

That is science fiction’s special advantage and its special challenge: going beyond the boundaries of the here-and-now to test the human spirit in new and ever-more-powerful ways.

This means that the SF field can encompass a tremendous variety of story types, from the hard-core science-based fiction that I usually write to the softer SF of writers such as Ray Bradbury and Harlan Ellison, and from glitzy Hollywood “sci-fi” flicks to the various kinds of fantasy and horror that now crowd the SF field. Hard-core science fiction, the type that is based on the world as we know it, has been my life. I have been reading it since junior high school, writing it for more than four decades.

#### The Demand for Science Fiction

Over the past few years, several editors have told me that they are longing to see hard-core science fiction stories. They tell me they are glutted with soft SF and fantasy and other types of stories. There is a demand for science fiction material that is not being met by the writers.

Why is this so? Perhaps it is because honest science fiction is the toughest kind of fiction to write. Every time I hear the term “hard science fiction,” I think to myself, “Hard? It’s goddamned exhausting, that’s what it is!”

#### Science Fiction’s Special Requirements

Every good science fiction story must present to the reader a world that no one has ever seen before. You cannot take it for granted that the sky is blue, that chairs have legs, or that what goes up must come down. In a good science fiction story the writer is presenting a new world in a fresh universe. In addition to all the other things that a good story must accomplish, a good science fiction tale must present the ground rules? And use them consistently without stopping the flow of the narrative.

In other forms of fiction the writer must create believable characters and set them in conflict to generate an interesting story. In science fiction the writer must do all this and much more. Where in the universe is the story set? Is it even in our universe? Are we in the future or the distant past? Is there a planet under our feet or are we dangling in zero gravity? The science fiction writer must set the stage carefully and show it to the reader without letting the stage settings steal the attention from the characters and their problems.

Indeed, one of the faults found with science fiction by outsiders is that all too frequently the underlying idea or the exotic background is all that the story has going for it. The characters, the plot, everything else becomes quite secondary to the ideas.

Where anything is possible, everything has to be explained. Yet the modern writer does not have the luxury of spending a chapter or two giving the life history of each major character, the way Victorian writers did. Or page after page of pseudoscientific justification for each new scientific wonder, the way the pulp magazines of the 1920s and 1930s did.

Very well then, if science fiction is so tough to write, why bother?

Because of its *power*, that’s why.

#### Science Fiction’s Special Satisfactions

This tremendous latitude, this ability to set a story anywhere and anytime, not only presents the writer with a massive set of problems, it also gives the writer the marvelous opportunity? And perhaps the responsibility? To offer a powerful commentary on the world of today by showing it reflected in an imaginary world of tomorrow (or, in some cases, of distant yesterdays).

Some people have praised science fiction for its predictions. Nuclear

power, space flight, computers, and most of the technological trappings of today's world were predicted in science fiction tales more than half a century ago. More important, I think, is that science fiction stories also predicted the Cold War, the global population explosion, environmental pollution, and many of the social problems we are wrestling with today.

Picture the history of the human race as a vast migration through time, thousands of millions of people wandering through the centuries. The writers of science fiction are the scouts, the explorers, the pathfinders who venture out ahead and look over the landscape, then send back stories that warn of the harsh desert up ahead, the thorny paths to be avoided, or tales that dazzle us with reports of beautiful wooded hills and clear streams and sunny grasslands that lie just over the horizon.

Those who read science fiction never fall victim to future shock. They have seen the future in the stories we have written for them. That is a glittering aspiration for a writer. And a heavy responsibility.

### *Chapter Three*

## *Character in Science Fiction* **Character: Theory**

*What is either a picture or a novel that is not character?*

*—Henry James*

All *fiction* is based on character.

That is, every fiction story hinges on the writer's handling of the people in the story. In particular, it is the central character, or protagonist, who makes the difference between a good story and a bad one.

In fact, you can define a story as the prose description of a character attempting to solve a problem? Nothing more. And nothing less.

In science fiction, the character need not be a human being. Science fiction stories have been written in which the protagonist is a robot, an alien from another world, a supernatural being, an animal or even a plant. But in each case, the story was successful only if the protagonist? No matter what he/she/it looked like or was made of? behaved like a human being.

Readers come to stories for enjoyment. They do not want to be bored or confused. They do not want to be preached to. If a reader starts a story about a machine or a tree or a pintail duck, and the protagonist has no human traits at all — it simply grinds its gears or sways in the wind or lays eggs — the reader will quickly put the story down and turn to something else. But give the protagonist a human problem, such as survival, and let it struggle to solve that problem, and the reader will be able to enjoy the story.

A story is like any other form of entertainment: It must catch the audience's interest and then hold it. A printed story has enormous

advantages over every other form of entertainment, because the written word can appeal directly to the reader's imagination. A writer can unlock the reader's imagination and take the reader on an exciting journey to strange and wonderful lands, using nothing more than ink and paper. A writer does not need a crew of actors, directors, musicians, stagehands, cameramen or props, sets, curtains, lights. All a writer needs is a writing tool with which to speak directly to the reader.

On the other hand, the writer never meets the reader. You can't stand at a reader's elbow and explain the things that puzzle him; you can't advise the reader to skip the next few paragraphs because they are really not necessary to understand the story and should have been taken out. The writer must put down everything she wants to say, in print, and hope that the reader will see and hear and feel and taste and smell the things that the writer wants to get across. You are asking the reader to understand what was in your mind while you were writing, to understand it by deciphering those strange ink marks on the paper.

Your job as a writer is to make the reader live in your story. You must make the reader forget that he is sitting in a rather uncomfortable chair, squinting at the page in poor light, while all sorts of distractions poke at him. You want your reader to believe that he is actually in the world of your imagination, the world you have created, climbing up that mountain you've written about, struggling against the cold and ice to find the treasure that you planted up at the peak.

The easiest way? In fact, the only good way? To make the reader live in your story is to give the reader a character that he wants to be.

Let the reader imagine that she is Anna Karenina, facing a tragic choice between love and family. Or David Hawkins being chased by pirates across Treasure Island. Let the reader live the life of Nick Adams or Tugboat Annie or Sherlock Holmes or Cinderella.

## MAKING CHARACTERS LIVE

How do you do this? There are two major things to keep in mind.

First, remember that every story is essentially the description of a character struggling to solve a problem. Pick your central character with care. The protagonist must be interesting enough, and have a grievous-enough problem, to make the reader care about her. Often the protagonist is called the viewpoint character, because the story is told from that character's point of view. It is the protagonist's story that you are telling, and she must be strong enough to carry the story.

Select a protagonist (or viewpoint character) who has great strengths and at least one glaring weakness, and then give him a staggering problem. Think of Hamlet, Shakespeare's Prince of Denmark. He was strong, intelligent, handsome, loyal, a natural leader; yet he was indecisive, uncertain of himself, and this was his eventual undoing. If Hamlet had been asked to lead an army or woo a lady or get straight As at the university, he could have done it easily. But Shakespeare gave him a problem that preyed on his weakness, not his strength. This is what every good writer must do. Once you have decided who your protagonist will be and you know his strengths and weaknesses, hit him where it hurts most! Develop an instinct for the jugular. Give your main character a problem that she cannot solve, and then make it as difficult as possible for her to struggle out of her dilemma.