

The science fiction writer has escaped from the mundane world and entered the infinite universe. He can use whatever he wants, if he can imagine it and make it his own. . .

The Special Problems of Science Fiction

by GENE WOLFE

LIKE all fiction, science fiction rests on the four sturdy legs of theme, character, style, and plot. For practical purposes, it includes all stories and novels in which "the strange" is the dominant characteristic. Sf's particular problems result from the author's need to make this element - "the strange" - acceptable to the reader.

Theme

In the broadest sense, theme is the story's central concern. In a science fiction story, for example, the theme might be the effects of a system of embalming so improved that the dead could be distinguished from the living only with difficulty. (This was the theme of my story, "The Packerhaus Method," in which the chief character's father was proven dead only by the fact that he could not get his cigar to draw.) Notice that the theme has nothing to do with what *happens* to the characters. Theme is what the story is *about*.

In science fiction, it is imperative that the theme of each story be fresh or treated from a new angle: If the theme is not original or given a fresh treatment, it cannot be "strange." The most common - and the most disastrous - error beginning sf writers make is to assume that editors want more stories on the same themes as the ones they have already published. The writer erases the collected works of Isaac Asimov and Jack Williamson, for example, and tries to write a robot story like theirs. His story cannot be "like theirs" because their stories were fresh and original when they appeared; an imitation cannot be either.

On the other hand, it is still possible to write original robot stories. In "It's Very Clean," I wrote about a girl who posed as a robot because she could not find work as a human being. I like to think that was original. In "Eyebeam," I wrote about a robot forest ranger, and in "Going to the Beach," I described an encounter with a robot streetwalker down on her luck.

The trick (and I think it one of the most difficult in writing) is to see things from a new angle. I have found three questions useful in stimulating sf story ideas.

The first is: *What if something new came along?* Think of something some people (not necessarily everyone) would like to have, and imagine that it has been invented. During the Vietnam War, for example, it occurred to me that the Pentagon would probably like to be able to grow soldiers in laboratory flasks. I added an almost inevitable near-future development, the unmanned, computer-controlled battle tank, and came up with a story called, "The HORARS of War." (This story originally appeared in the Delacorte collection *Nova I*, edited by Harry Harrison, and as a Dell paperback; it has since been reprinted by Doubleday in *A Pocketful of Stars*, edited by Damon Knight, and was selected for reprinting again in Doubleday's *Combat-SF*, edited by Gordon Dickson. Many sf stories are reprinted - and paid for - repeatedly.)

The second idea-generator is : *What if it gets better?* Take some existing art, skill, or what-you-like, and imagine that some brilliant technician is to spend his life improving it. What will it be like when he is finished? What will the social consequences of his improvements be? *What if it gets better?* - the source of my "The Packerhaus Method." A less macabre example is "The Toy Theater," in which I had life-sized marionettes equipped with remote controls.

The third question: *What if those two got together?* Combine two existing customs, practices, sciences, or institutions. In "Beech Hill," I merged the writers' conference (where people who write fiction assemble) with the class of the poseur, the person whose life is his fiction. What I got was an annual gathering of those who pretend to be what they are not - a "secret agent," an "international adventuress," a "wild animal trainer," "the richest man in the world," and so on. My "secret agent" was really a short-order cook, and he wrote the rest of the story.

Character

Science fiction's fictional people are hard to make believable because they are likely to be remote from the writer's experience. Who has known a Martian? A starship captain? A woman who has published scientific articles intended to prove that she is not a human being? If the writer cannot empathize with people who do not yet exist - and may never exist - he must stay out of science fiction.

In addition to empathy, there must be plausibility. A man sent to explore a new world, for example, is not likely to be a complete fool or a hopeless neurotic, though someone who finds himself in that position by accident may be either. As with other kinds of writing, character is manifested in speech and action, or by admitting the reader to the character's mind.