

# **The League of Almost Superheroes**

*Stories*

**Aaron Schutz**



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For my brother Jeremy  
I wish he could have read it

And with thanks to Kate Wilhelm, Damon Knight, and the other  
participants in their monthly workshop.

# Preface

## Memories of (Not Really) Becoming a Fiction Writer

I'M ASSUMING THAT a book of short stories by an unknown writer will mostly attract science fiction aficionados. I write, here, for those people. For people like me. If that's not you, you may want to skip on to the stories. (Perhaps I am writing only to myself.) I am writing for people who want to know something about the person behind the words.

Damon Knight once said to me that all of us science fiction writers were “plips” when we were younger. I think I know what he meant. That writers are often the little people who no one notices, who don't quite fit in. You know.

In my junior year of high school, I submitted a short story to a state-wide competition. Something about kids growing up on an oily, iron, rusting spaceship. And I won a place at a week-long workshop for young writers at Lewis and Clark College in Portland, Oregon.

I remember odd images from that week. The girl who wrote poems about death and tried to convince us that she wasn't overweight, that she had “big bones.” The kid who wrote pornography and read it to us out loud, blanking out all of the dirty words—which, of course, made it much more titillating. The first time I heard Frank Zappa's daughter sing “Gag Me With a Spoon.” The little foot-bridge over a deep, forested slash in the hill at the edge of campus. The boxing journalist teacher who wrote her first novel on the toilet over lunch breaks on her factory job. (She said she'd written it without punctuation because she didn't really know the rules, and then they'd published it that way because they thought she was being postmodern.) The poet William Stafford telling us that we shouldn't worry about writing long texts because everything is always just “a bunch of little pieces” (I often repeat this to my doctoral students). Stafford telling us never to use a thesaurus, and me telling him later that the perfect word he'd just praised in a poem of mine had, of course, come from the thesaurus (he did not seem amused).

And I remember meeting the SF writer Kate Wilhelm. She seemed ancient to the high-school me, with long brilliant white hair. Her smoke-blue eyes made it seem like you were falling into the dark pupils when you stared into them.

I don't really remember anything specific she said. What I do remember is that during the critique sessions I suddenly realized that there was a "method to this madness," that there were some key "rules" to writing good fiction. A revelation. If that's all that had happened, I think I still would have learned to write.

But after that summer, Kate invited me to the writing workshop that she and her husband and fellow writer Damon Knight ran out of their house. And they decided that I was mature and committed enough to keep inviting. They lived in my hometown, Eugene, Oregon, so I could make it out to them by taking the bus.

For the next five years, through my last year of high school and all of college, during Fall, Winter, and Spring (they were on hiatus in the Summer), I came almost every month to their house.

Many of you will know that Kate and Damon were the nexus for teaching "plippy" science fiction writers in America. Damon had created Milford, one of the first professional SF writing workshops in his house (Kate met him there), and together they founded and taught for decades as the final two instructors at the famous Clarion summer writing workshop. Of course, they were also wonderful, award-winning writers in their own right.

At workshop sessions, Kate and Damon chain-smoked as we went around the circle commenting on each story, Kate on the couch and Damon across from her on his big chair. An enormous Webster's unabridged dictionary he'd picked up at a garage sale served as Damon's settee. (Sometimes, when someone had the temerity to assert that creative use of punctuation was part of *creative* writing he would bang his feet on the big book and declare "It's just wrong!") At one point, I they had air cleaners running next to both of them throughout the critique session, but I don't think it made much difference to the air quality—not that I cared. An enormous abstract painting that looked like an orange black hole in space hung surrounded by a packed bookshelf with shelves that held all of the books Kate and Damon had published. (I remember Kate saying that she and Damon could never get divorced, because they'd never be able to figure out how to split up the books.)

Damon's Hugo Award for editing hung out on top of a little bookshelf in their book-cluttered entryway. I touched it once and a piece fell off. I didn't tell anyone.

I was half the age of everyone else there, and I remember the wonderful lady who was a lawyer on the coast (who had adopted at least one troubled teenager) kind of adopted me as her workshop "kid." Sometimes she gave me a ride home.

Once, early in my time there, the workshop was going through some teething pains. A couple of participants were very angry at Kate and Damon for some reason I never understood. I had brought a story to the workshop titled something incomprehensible like "...and a Taste of Orangebird." It was about a planet with titanic weather. People came during storms to party all night and risk their lives standing in rickety towers on the edge of an island as some kind of test of will or existential comment on the fragility of life, or something like that.

One of the angry workshopers dropped my story on the ground, stamped her foot on it and declared "This is shit!" After the critique was over, during a break, my workshop mom told me I could "go throw up now" if I needed. But I was so amazed that I was even in the room with these people that I didn't know there was anything wrong. Weirdly enough, I don't remember it bothering me that much—I guess I figured that's what happened there, and if that's the way it was, it was okay with me as long as they didn't kick me out. (Damon said, somewhat more kindly, that this was my "death wish" story, that everyone needed to write a "death wish" story, and that I shouldn't write any more.)

The "shit" lady and her compatriots never came back if I remember correctly, which made things a bit quieter around the circle.

**THOSE WHO HAVE** been to Clarion or something similar based on Kate and Damon's approach will know the basic drill of the critique session. On these Saturday workshops, people with something to critique brought stories with them. Throughout the early part of the day, everyone hung around chatting and reading the stories. Then, later in the day, we'd sit in the dim smoky circle and each person would give her comments, with the author forced to stay quiet until the end. I probably learned more from comments on other people's stories than on mine—you're always a little hyped up when you are being critiqued. What you really learn after sitting through a whole lot of sessions like this is how

stories “work.” You learn some key rules of story writing in western culture, and, at the same time, you learn how good writers break these rules. The best stories *do* often break rules—but you can’t break them until you really understand them. (I think someone once said this about Picasso: he first needed to learn how to paint correctly before he could paint incorrectly with brilliance.)

Workshopping is very different than what English professors do in their classrooms. You are analyzing stories not for meaning, but for effect. It is about craft—almost like a group of architects talking together about how to build an elegant building. The architect metaphor is useful, I think, because it combines the hard-headed analysis of an engineer (do you need a beam *here* to make sure the house doesn’t fall down?) combined with more fuzzy questions of aesthetics (does the balcony on the left balance well with the driveway?). In story terms, one asks questions like: How does the choice of point of view work? What does it allow and not allow? Does a particular character really need to be there? Some of the discussion addresses whether the story usefully follows key principles of fiction writing (some of these are laid out in the appendix at the end of this book). I say *usefully*, because critiquers need to stay open to the possibility that a particular “rule” doesn’t really apply or is should legitimately be bent in a particular case.

The justification for particular suggestions can be unclear. Good writers slowly develop a gut sense for what works and what doesn’t. “It just doesn’t seem to work for me,” is often the best you can get. If a lot of people agree, you probably have an issue. But no one else can tell you exactly how to fix your story.

(I used to write “Don’t Do What I Say” on the chalkboard in the first meeting of my expository writing classes. “I’ll give you the best suggestions I’ve got,” I would say, “but don’t come back and tell me your essay’s got to be good because you did what I said. It’s *your* essay. *You’ve* got to figure out what will work. If it didn’t work, it didn’t work.”)

When workshoppers talk about “English professor” issues—theme, or social critique, or the like—they link these to practical issues. Stories are not essays. They are not trying to make a “point” in a simple sense. And when they do, they usually fail as fiction. Stories are about ineffable issues of life. They address themes, but they do not answer questions. That is the secret to their effect—they bring us into the messiness of life, the difficulty in answering questions, or even of framing questions



in any simple way. In an essay, you often want someone to think, to consider what is going on in a conscious way. In stories, in the main, authors want their readers to “be” with the text. In the best stories, the text disappears and one is left with an experience. One is “in” the world of the author’s creation, not thinking “about” it.

Contradictorily enough, one generally creates this verisimilitude through artificiality. In stories, people who talk in convincing ways don’t actually speak the way they would in the real world. You need to make them speak just wrong enough to make it seem like they are speaking authentically, if that makes sense.

Perhaps more importantly, in stories the world generally “makes sense” in a way that the real world does not. In the real world, shit happens. As many great scholars and researchers have shown, humans create coherent stories out of their lives in retrospect. Meaning is a product of human creativity; it emerges out of a selective process of looking back. The world as it is does not consist of an intelligible narrative. In real life, things are there because they are there. In a story, somebody trips on the curb and falls to serve some story purpose. In the real world we trip and fall because...we trip and fall.

Some would say that everything happens for a reason. Perhaps. Sounds like wishful thinking to me. And I don’t think religion gives us much solace around this. If you read the Bible honestly you do not find many easy answers. You mostly find stories of people struggling with life and making decisions that are rarely clearly good or evil, or right or wrong. God’s actions are often difficult to fathom. Reading the bible again and again is productive because it doesn’t have easy answers, not because it does. Or, at least, that’s my experience.

In a story, especially a short story where space is precious, everything is included for a reason. Not for some explicit, logical reason like in an essay, but for a reason nonetheless. Nabokov once wrote that “if there is a gun hanging on the wall in the first act it must fire in the last.” Not quite. The gun must be there for a *reason*. But that reason is not pre-set. This “reason” emerges from the context of the story the gun resides in.

Often, authors discover what the gun is there for as they write. Once the gun is put into the story, it becomes a component that should be used in some way. It must serve some purpose. It is there and so becomes part of the context that builds the story world, even if it is not even mentioned explicitly again.

In my note about “Stories as Sine Waves” in the Appendix I argue that the return of such components throughout the story is key to verisimilitude. Once one mentions a gun, it becomes one possible thread to be remembered as one moves forward through the writing process. Such components build up as a story develops. A kind of pressure of internal history grows in the author’s mind as the story progresses. *Don’t forget the woman he bumped into at the grocery store on page 2; don’t forget her fleeting desire to get a new dog on page 7; don’t forget his falling into a swimming pool on page 10.*

IN COLLEGE, I first majored in biology because I thought I might want to go to the Peace Corps, and because I wanted to have some kind of useful skill. I dual minored in biology and chemistry, but ended up majoring in history because I took a lot of classes with a friend of mine, and one of the professors liked my writing. I wrote my honors thesis on “Cicero’s Patronal Relationship to Pompey and Caesar,” because they wouldn’t let me submit a short story as a thesis for a non-writing degree. (I wrote the thesis in a mad session over spring break. My history friend asked my advisor what he thought of it after he got it, and he said it wasn’t bad, but a little “stream-of-consciousness.” Let’s just say that it wasn’t a shining academic accomplishment. But it got me my degree.)

I spent most of my time, however, writing short stories in a local coffee shop, even though I didn’t major in creative writing. In fact, I only took one writing class. I remember being annoyed in that writing class at the “writing clique” kids that thought they were so cool. When the professor announced that the winner of the University writing award that year was in the class, they were shocked that it was me (and not one of them). I didn’t tell them that I only brought my really problematic stories into the class—I didn’t need help with the ones that mostly worked.

My writing process at the time was like a personal battle. Every line was a painful struggle until, somewhere about half-way through a story, everything would fall together, and the rest of the story would flow out mostly effortlessly. It took me forever to write a story—I really finished about one solid story a year.

When I got to the end of college, I had absolutely no idea what to do with myself. The open vacuum of life beyond school loomed with terror-filled uncertainty. It was the first time I actually had to decide what

to do with myself, and I realized I didn't have the vaguest sense of what the answer was. I ended up applying to creative writing masters programs for the simple reason that it was something I knew I could do, and I didn't have any better ideas. I didn't think I really had much to learn (I'd already studied with the best) and I knew that there was no hope that I would ever be a "writer," given how long it took me to write. But it would give me more time to avoid figuring out what to do with myself.

I applied to New York University because—and this is the God honest truth—it had the most beautiful application paper: multiple colors of purple and orange. One morning they woke me up with a phone call and told me I'd won a small scholarship. I asked them how hard it would be to get a job out there. They said if I spoke English, I wouldn't have a problem. So I said, "Okay, I'll come," and rolled over to go back to sleep. Why not?

I was so utterly clueless that I didn't know that Manhattan was an island until the day before I left. I had absolutely no idea what "New York City" was like. In fact, when I was in the cab heading from the airport to my graduate dorm, I actually got just a little panicked when I saw signs for "Jamaica Plains" all around me and wondered whether maybe I had taken the wrong plane.

For reasons I won't get into, I was not in the best emotional shape when I got to New York. New York can be an isolating place, and writing is an isolating activity—they two didn't fit together well for me. I did a lot of interesting things in New York. One thing I did not do much of, however, was write. I actually seemed to have lost the capacity to write: not a "writing block" so much as an erasure of the "fiction writing" side of my brain. When I did force myself to write, with the exception of one two-page story, it was pretty mechanical—lacking much emotion or energy.

ONE DAY, BEFORE I left for New York, I was at Kate and Damon's house, and Damon asked me why I still hadn't published anything. He mentioned "Beyond the Seventh Sphere" in particular. I asked him if I could write in my next submission that "Damon Knight told me I should write that he thinks this is a great story and that you should publish it." He said I could. So I did.

One evening, early in my time in New York, I came home fairly drunk. In my mailbox was a manila envelope with a contract and a brief note. It was from the editor I sent the “Damon says buy it” letter to. They’d bought it.

Huh. Okay....

I didn’t feel any different. I went up in the elevator in an alcohol daze. I went to sleep and got up the next day and nothing, really, had changed.

I WROTE MY second published story, “Small,” in a dim lower half-basement coffee shop on Bleeker Street. I remember that it just came to me as I was sitting there. The whole thing rushed out in one easy stream of words. That’s the only time something like that has ever happened to me—from idea to story in a single session. It was the last real story I wrote for twenty years.

(I actually published a third story from my early years, “Cotton Country,” in 2005—almost two decades after I wrote it. It’s not included here, however. I’m still not entirely comfortable with it, although I may revise it someday and add it in. “Sphere,” in this collection, also makes me a little uncomfortable in retrospect. But I was 19 at the time, and lived in a very limited, homogenous world. I did a little surgery for this publication, but mostly left it as it was. You’ll have to decide if I managed the vision I was aiming for.)

OTHERWISE, I ACTUALLY made it through an entire graduate writing program without writing anything of note—sometimes submitting stories to class that I’d written earlier.

While some of the other students were good writers, and interesting people, I didn’t connect well with them. A science fiction writer was a bit out of place in a program full of people with nice prose but, it seemed to me, mostly not much to say. There was one brilliant but kind of crazy student who wrote an incredible story about someone killing a kitten. (This guy had a strategy for making sure he never had a roommate in graduate student housing. When an assigned roommate showed up, he’d slur his words and talk about how he needed to go out and get more crack, or lean out the 10<sup>th</sup> story window and talk about suicide. They never came back.) There was a woman from a rich construction family in the Midwest who never wrote anything. She just walked

around New York listening to Frank Sinatra on her headphones. There was this eccentric heavy-set guy who kept all of his stuff in a messy briefcase that spilled his lunch and papers out all over the place when it opened. He was writing a hilarious novel about a bunch of oddballs who lived in a house on the coast. Outside the program there was a city filled with black turtleneck-wearing aspiring writers. But it turned out that a lot of the people in the program were thoughtful, middle-aged mothers from New Jersey. I'm not sure what that says.

I remember a few teachers. Luisa Valenzuela was a deeply thoughtful and poised woman who had written critically about the dictatorship in Argentina while people were being “disappeared” around her. She created the most powerful community in her class, and was deeply respectful while also remaining honest and critical. Thomas Keneally, the writer of the book that was made into the movie *Schindler's List* had, I think, just finished writing a book about Eritrea during the war with Ethiopia after living in mountain tunnels with the fighters. Keneally was a loud, funny, bear of a guy, an ex-seminarian from Australia who always brought an enormous jug of red wine to class. We got pleasantly pissed while we criticized each other—quite a nice way to workshop. E. L. Doctorow didn't like me and I didn't like him, I'm afraid. I wasn't in the best shape at the time, and he made it clear that he didn't think I could write worth a damn, which was, of course, a pretty accurate reading at the time.

I chose Doctorow as my thesis supervisor. I don't remember why—probably because most of the people I'd studied with were part-timers and gone at the time, and because I really didn't care that much. I remember asking him what he thought of my thesis after he'd approved it, and he said, “I'm sure it was fine.” I still think that's funny. Actually, the thesis wasn't bad—mostly because it consisted almost entirely of stuff I'd written before I got to New York. He might have been a little surprised if he'd actually read it. Then again, probably not.

That was it for fiction-writing and me for a long time.

OVER THE TWO decades that followed, I worked with inner-city youth, went to Michigan for more graduate work, became a professor.

Then, twenty years later, having pulled my brain together a bit, I figured I might try my hand at some fiction, just for fun. To see what would happen.

I discovered not only that I could write again, but for the first time I could write without fighting to get the words on the page. In fact, one of the stories in this book, “Dr. Death vs. the Vampire,” was written over Memorial Day weekend as part of the Three Day Novel Writing Contest. After the weekend, I realized it didn’t really work as a novel. But after cutting some extraneous parts the rest worked quite well as a novelette. (The story that appears here is pretty much what I had after three sleep-deprived days.)

I CAME BACK to fiction as what the SF folks call a “pro,” if a very, very junior one. And that made all the difference. Mostly gone were the endless stream of rejection letters in my mailbox.

You see, it is very hard to sell a story to one of the top publications—especially today when there are not many professional short story venues left. Once you have published even a small number of stories in them, you begin to skip the slush pile and go straight to the editor.

Getting out of the slush pile is key, because slush is generally read by low-level staff or un-paid interns who dig month after month through literal mountains of unsolicited manuscripts. Even when it is read by the actual editor, they know they are reading *slush*, and that’s got to affect their attitude. You could be the best writer in the universe, and if they are nodding off by the time they get to your story, you’ve got no chance.<sup>1</sup> Skipping the slush also means that you have more leeway not to grab a reader in the first paragraph. You’ve got enough “credit” in the bank to get the editor to read at least a couple of pages. That doesn’t mean they accept everything, of course. In this book, for example, “Dr. Death” was rejected once, “Moments of Grace” a couple of times. But it gives you a huge advantage.

Part of the reason why there is such a thing as “pro” status, even for someone as unprolific as myself is that, oddly enough, once people start to sell to the top markets it usually means that something indefinable has “clicked” in their heads. Before, they couldn’t write pro-level stories. After, they can. Why this would be the case, I can’t say. But my sense from those others I’ve known is that it’s often the way it works.

Like all plippy writers, I had a fat file of rejection letters from my first go round. I wish I still had my early ones, but I left them on the subway one day on my way to a writing class I was teaching. When you get printed rejection slip after printed rejection slip—“We receive many

more wonderful stories than we could possibly hope to publish. . . .”—even the smallest comment, a scrawled “not bad” can get your heart racing. Once I got a rejection from Terry Carr, a pretty well-known editor. It was an entire single-spaced page of typing, laying out why my story was crappy, why my plot was stupid, and a whole bunch of other stuff I had done wrong.

Someone without a hundred printed rejection slips might have been crushed. I was ecstatic. The great Terry Carr had taken the time to rip my head off. Wonderful!

(Actually, I remember my first rejection letter, from George Schithers at *Amazing Stories* when I was in junior high. Telling an editor you are 13 is a good way to get a response. His note was badly typed on an index card. All I remember is that he told me that it would help my chances if I checked my spelling.)

(By the way, a mostly unsuccessful fiction writing career is quite a useful training ground for a budding academic. While other Ph.D. students were writing papers for professors and then forgetting them, I was following the adage of all aspiring fiction writers: get it as good as you can, stick it in an envelope, send it off, and move on to the next thing. I didn’t ask anyone, I just did it. The occasional crushing review from a journal didn’t seem that bad after Terry Carr and the “shit” lady. I’d be depressed for about ten minutes and then I was fine. Actually, it was wonderful to get reviews. Free advice on how to write! I never had a paper rejected twice.)

I WROTE “DR. Death” before we adopted our two girls. If I didn’t have children, I might write more (but I’d rather have kids). I also write as an academic these days, and while the two forms of writing are very different, they use similar parts of the brain. I haven’t really been able to do both at the same time. And I’ve got all kinds of other stuff going on as well.

I also am not so compelled about writing stories anymore. I know why I’m doing my academic work and my community work: who I want to affect, and how I want to affect them. But I’m not so sure about stories.

I like the feeling I have when I write something I think is powerful. (I remember, for example, when a key image in the last section of “Cotton” came together in an overwhelming rush with no warning. I was

walking beside a dilapidated hurricane fence around a dusty parking lot in downtown Eugene. I don't think I'd even been thinking about the story. Those who don't create will never know the visceral feeling that comes when chaos suddenly coalesces together into form. I found a scrap of paper on the sidewalk and scrawled it down. [Often you end up realizing after an epiphany crystallizes in your mind that what you got is crap. But even then it's an awesome feeling.]

I like the idea that people will read a story I wrote (more people have likely read my fiction than my academic work). But I just don't have the deep motivation I once had.

I think that when I was younger, I was convinced, on some deep level, that if I became a successful writer I would join a magical club. Of course, the irony was that I had actually already been a member of the "club" in Kate and Damon's workshop in a way that not enough others really ever experience.

I also think I believed that I would somehow gain this wonderful connection with readers if my stories were published. But I know now that while other people may get a deep emotional experience from reading your stories, it's not something you participate in. Aside from a few comments on blogs by people you don't know, stories live their own lives in the world quite separate from the author's.

Perhaps things would be different if I had been deep in the life of an SF "fan." But I've never really been attracted to science fiction conventions. I like engaging with writers, but there are just too many people at a convention and the whole thing is too frenetic for me. And I'm interested in talking with writers, not fans. I did go to the Nebula Awards when it was held in Chicago a few years ago, and it was fun to meet editors and other writers. I'd do that again.

It is still cool to publish a story. But, as I realized so long ago now in New York, it isn't the life-transforming experience I expected.

## **The Stories**

THERE ISN'T MUCH more to say about the rest of the stories. For some reason the characters and the ideas were compelling to me. I couldn't really say why.

"Dr. Death" is an idea I had for years before I banged it out. Why did I need to write a story about a battle between "almost superheroes" on



a Greyhound bus? Who knows? Before I wrote it, as “research,” I rode a bus back from Minneapolis to Milwaukee while the rest of my family drove back. They thought I was nuts, of course. And my wife got a bit paranoid when she saw a whole bunch of books about poisoning people lying around my office.

The language at the end riffs off some scenes in Cormac MacCarthy’s *Blood Meridian* for some reason. I’ve often got a specific writer or book I’m drawing on for an overall sense of language when I write a particular story. MacCarthy just popped up at the end of “Death.”

Oddly enough, a version of “Dr. Death” is also now available as an online comic book, adapted and drawn by A. Kaviraj (see [championcitycomics.com](http://championcitycomics.com)). Kaviraj—who I’ve still only communicated with by email—contacted me out of the blue after reading the story and said it was just what he was looking for. He did a nice job. It was interesting to see what needed to change to make it work in a different format. Kaviraj is in the process of creating a second comic, “Dr. Death vs. the Zombie” in what he wants to be an ongoing Dr. Death series. I won’t have much part in writing these, however. I ended my writing compulsion around Dr. Death with the original story.

You never know where things are going to go.

“Moments of Grace” and “Being with Jimmy” just blossomed somehow when I was decided to sit down and write a story. “Jimmy” was the first story I wrote after my long vacation from fiction writing, and it began with some odd language about falling down stairs. I was really just playing with words when the story came together. “Grace” started with the image of birds at the beginning. (The little girl in the story was modeled on my niece.)

## Writing and Rules

I MENTIONED ABOVE that the most important thing I learned from Kate when I first met her at that high school writing conference was that there were principles for writing good fiction. If you want a sense of what Kate has to teach, you should get her wonderful little book, *Storyteller*, about her and Damon’s work with novice writers at Clarion. Damon also wrote a nice book called *Writing Short Fiction*.

Mostly I think reading books about how to write is a distraction from actually writing. It’s more about procrastination than learning. (Under-

neath blog posts by SF writers giving tips on writing, you will often see a long river of comments from aspiring writers: “thank you so much, this really helped.” Maybe.) But I do think it’s useful to internalize some core “rules” of writing. They create useful boundaries around what tends to work and not work in fiction (and in my case, in speculative fiction in particular). I’ve put a few of them into an Appendix at the end of this book which I pulled together from my work with Kate and Damon and two online documents I found when I was putting together my own little presentation on science fiction writing a few years ago. I take ownership of none unless they don’t work. In that case I’ve likely misremembered something.

These are “rules” in the sense that if you are going to break them you need to have a good reason. Most are probably not universal—reflecting some core aspects of American culture, writ broadly. Though simple, many are quite profound. Another reason to know the rules is that they tell you what “normal” stories do, and may give you hints about how you might jump outside the “normal” in ways you might not otherwise have thought of. In other words, rules both help you stay within what generally works, *and* they help you see how you may be unconsciously limiting yourself to what is generally seen as working.

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<sup>i</sup>Jay Lake (<http://www.irosf.com/q/zine/article/10331>) recently estimated that, in the top markets, about one out of every 100 submissions is published. The situation is much worse for slush pile folks, because most of the published stories are by pros or semi-pros (e.g., Clarion grads.) of one sort or another. They were never in the slush pile to start with. So your chances of getting out of the slush pile are pretty astronomically bad. That said, editors are always looking for good new writers. And most of the stuff in the slush pile is execrable. So there is a lot of quantity competition but not much quality competition. Still... Getting through is often as much about luck as anything else. That’s why aspiring writers just keep sending stories out.

John C. Wright ([http://www.sfsignal.com/archives/2009/01/mind\\_meld\\_shrewd\\_writing\\_advice\\_from\\_some\\_of\\_science\\_fiction\\_and\\_fantasys\\_best\\_writers/](http://www.sfsignal.com/archives/2009/01/mind_meld_shrewd_writing_advice_from_some_of_science_fiction_and_fantasys_best_writers/)) noted Ursula LeGuin’s assertion “that the average number of submissions to magazines before an unknown author makes his first sale is one hundred tries.” As Wright noted,

That is, let me emphasize, the average: which means if someone, let us say, Lester Del Rey, makes his first sale on his first attempt, then someone else, let us say, Ray Bradbury, will make two hundred submissions or more before his first sale. This little fact prevented me from falling into the temptation of surrender. When I had submitted

dozens of stories to dozens of magazines and had accumulated 90 rejection slips or so, instead of despairing, I said to myself, "Ten to go."

Sounds about right to me. See also Teresa Nielsen Hayden's insightful comments at <http://nielsenhayden.com/making-light/archives/004641.html>. And, for fun, look at all the wonderful chunks of letters to and from authors that Damon put in his *Best of Orbit* anthology, including a wonderful send-up of a submission letter from a dweeby writer.



# Dr. Death vs. the Vampire

## THE UNWASHED MASSES

THE STEADY KNOCKING of my head against the metal frame of the bus window woke me from a troubled sleep. Pushing back against the bulk of my seatmate, I struggled to find a more comfortable position. For a moment I didn't know where I was, gazing blearily out at the desolate landscape. The sun hung low in the sky like the end of a smoldering brazing rod. Even through tinted glass, in the rattle of our air-conditioned box, I sensed the heat. Rolling hills of hard-packed earth and gray-green sage swept by, broken here and there by the upthrust of red sandstone cliffs. Lonely junipers hunched above the sage like hags. I had left the lush Columbia River forests behind as I slept and descended into the starkly beautiful hell of the Eastern Oregon desert.

What a mess.

Shifting uncomfortably again, I let my head fall back on the headrest. First class, that's what I like—not that I can ever afford it. I can't ever quite get used to the stink of the bus: cheap beer, greasy chips, and generic cigarettes overlaid with a spicy tang of body odor. Every bump in the road shook my queasy stomach and set aluminum seat posts chattering.

My ears recoiled against the diesel rumble of the engine, the low mumble of conversations, and the tinny thump of deafness-inducing teenage music seeping around plastic ear buds. A woman in the seat behind me was arguing with someone on a cell phone in an acrid streak of Spanish expletives, but I controlled the urge to tell her to shut her face. At least the fat kid in the seat next to me had finally fallen asleep, snoring quietly.

Buses are the last refuge of the lost and the downtrodden. Long-haul bus riders are the excrement on the boots of society. Army grunts on leave press in with polite migrant workers in dirty shoes and too-clean cheap shirts; single mothers with snotty griping kids annoy old ladies on a last trip to visit their dying brothers; criminals on the lam try to pick up cute college kids; all interspersed with a smattering of almost normal

folks who'd waited too long to take the plane. You probably wouldn't pay much attention. But I'm a sensitive guy, you see. This time, the fat kid cut the edge a bit, but it was still horrible.

I stay away from drugs mostly, although an occasional toke or pink tab of Klonopin can be nice. Addiction for someone like me always lurks just ahead in the fog. In any case, I wasn't entirely sure I'd made a clean break from trouble in Portland, and I couldn't afford to be less than one hundred percent.

But I was prepared, as always. Painfully, I managed to force my arm down to the battered leather valise between my legs. Rummaging around in the carefully ordered velcroed pill bottles and vials and assorted tools of my trade, I located a strip of Bonine tablets and a little bottle of ibuprofen. Dry-swallowing the pills, I took a risk, stripping the surgical gloves from my clammy hands for a while. Then I flopped back to try to get a little more sleep.

But I had woken the fat kid. "Hey, mister," he said loudly, making me cringe. I didn't answer. I didn't want to encourage him. "Wow," he said, pressing down on me as he leaned over and looked through the window. "That's really hot out there, huh, Mister?" Then, thankfully, he went back to his Dean Koontz book. But since he had apparently never learned to read silently, I was treated yet again to a mumbling rendition of the latest chapter with the occasional laugh or belch or liquid chomping on his apparently endless supply of red ropes. Every once in a while he'd look up to say, "This is really a good part," or "Boy, this is good, ain't it?"

The trick to having a seat to yourself, usually, is to pile your stuff into the seat next to you and then pretend you are asleep. It also helps to look a little scruffy, and I'd rubbed some dirt into my face and mussed up my hair before I got on. So when the driver hissed the door closed after the final boarder, I figured I was home free. I wasn't paying attention, eyes closed, letting the complex sensations of the other riders around me wash through my body as the kid—he couldn't have been more than fifteen—lumbered down the aisle toward me.

"Mister?" he had asked, "Mister, can I have that seat?" When I didn't respond, he just picked up my valise and dropped it into my lap. "Thanks, Mister," he said, wedging himself in, managing to thump me in the face with one of his balloon-man arms before I could do more than yelp.

"Hey!" I complained.

But he just came back with a friendly, “Hi, Mister.” Digging into the stained nylon knapsack now perched on his stomach, he pulled out a thick battered paperback, and waved it in front of my face.

“D’ya like Dean Koontz, Mister?” he asked, and then yanked the book back, ignoring my angry look. “Dean Koontz is the best, I think. Do you think? This is my favorite. You see, there’s this neat dog and he can almost talk and stuff and the doctors, they did somethin’ with his head and these bad people are chasing him and this guy finds the dog and then...” Reaching into his knapsack, he pulled out a red licorice rope. “Want some?” he asked, and dropped one into my lap. Then, without any transition, he opened the book seemingly at random and began to read, occasionally stopping to bite a piece off one of the red ropes flaring like anemone tentacles from his right hand.

Truth was, it could have been worse. Somebody must have cleaned him up, because he didn’t smell that bad, which is surprising for a fat kid. All those folds and crannies tend to grow their own little ecologies of oily bacterial soup—believe me, I know all about it. And the kid’s Iron Maiden T-shirt had only collected a few stains, so far. There was even something oddly comforting about him. In fact, I soon realized that the kid was special.

He was a superhero. Well, not really, of course. There isn’t any such thing as superheroes. Only almost-superheroes. That’s what he was, though. An almost-superhero. What was his special power? Contentment. He was just plain happy. I tried to probe deeper, but unlike most people, he didn’t have any layers to him. Everything was surface. With him, what you saw was what you got. Nowhere could I find the slightest tinge of discomfort or anxiety or depression. You could have cut his foot off and it wouldn’t have bothered him that much, although he would have said “ouch.”

His superpower was not particularly useful—most aren’t, to tell the truth. But it was the reason I didn’t move to another seat, as uncomfortable as I was.

For me, he was like a blanket of calmness, filtering out some of the dejection of the unwashed masses around me. I even fantasized for a moment about kidnapping him and dragging him around with me like Linus’s blanket.

Every superhero needs a moniker. At least most of the ones I know do. So I dubbed him “Teflon Boy.” Everything seemed to just slip off

him without leaving any trace. Kind of like Ronald Reagan. But less dangerous.

## TERMINATION

SLEEP WAS NOT an option as Teflon Boy droned on and the woman behind became increasingly hostile and loud. (How long would her battery last?) I thought about reading some more of the little book about the Oregon desert I'd bought at our last stop—key rule: always know your environment—but it just didn't appeal. So I gave in to duty. I closed my eyes and cast my attention out through Teflon Boy's filter into the bus. Methodically, as I had slowly learned at the Farm, I drifted from person to person, starting at the front of the bus and moving back.

I sincerely hoped I wouldn't have to kill anyone today.

I am not a telepath. The closest descriptive term is probably "empath," in that I feel the emotions of other people. But my experience is more physical than empath usually seems to imply. I don't just feel emotions; I feel how others feel in their bodies. I feel their sensations, and through them I understand their emotions. So as I shifted from person to person I became, for a moment, those people. I felt headaches building up, tension in badly postured backs, the heaviness of the overweight, the pasty feeling of bodies fed on white bread and bologna, the taut muscles of a soldier.

And I also delved into the pains and horrors they carried around with them as physical manifestations of their pasts. While I couldn't link these to specific events or memories, still they gave me a powerful sense of who a particular individual really was on the inside, beneath those layers of resistance that often prevent us from understanding ourselves. (I have those as well—I can travel others but I cannot travel myself. Thus, I understand those around me better than I can ever understand myself.)

Most of the way through the bus, I didn't encounter much that troubled me. The usual fears and pains, the wheeze of asthma, the inner rumble of diverticulitis, the straining beat of an enlarged and failing heart. And layered amongst the mundane, often ignored sufferings of life, painful articulations of lives of regret, architectures of embodied desires and lost hopes, and touches of calm acceptance and rest alongside the resentment. Sexual abuse has a common sensation, as does al-





# Small

A BOY WALKED along the beach in search of a pebble. Ten years old, he was as small as five, sneakers barely leaving an imprint in the hard dark sand, cold wind whisking up wet strands of what was left of his blond hair.

The boy loved the sea. Clean and huge, it seemed to him the soul of emptiness and adventure. A bad thing was far away; he felt it seeking him. He pried a pebble from the sand, small and smooth and dark, indistinguishable from the many others, and it seemed as he looked up again that he himself was a pebble to that great wide water. Anything could happen in a place like that. It was there that he was most small.

When his father came to find him, he returned with his pebble clenched tight in his fist, deep in his pants pocket. As they drove away, his mother told him that he shouldn't be sad, that they would come back next year. He was not sad. She lied a little lie, but he liked small things.

THEY CAME TO a special apartment near the doctors' place, where he was given special food. When they went to see the doctors he always took his pebble and concentrated on being small.

"You must be very brave so you will grow to be a big man," one of the doctors told him. The boy knew doctors. He didn't like them. He wanted to be small.

## HE KNEW:

Small things are very precious. You must look close to see small things. Small boys get hugs. You cannot be with a small boy and be far away. Small boys can slip away and no one will notice. Doughnuts are bigger for small boys.

**THE DOCTORS WERE** always doing things. He was scared of them, but he didn't say so. They said he was brave, but he wasn't being brave—he was being small.

When they put the needle in his back, he held tight to his, pebble and whispered: *Small, small, small, small...* You are smaller if you are quiet. You are smaller if you don't scream.

### **LISTEN:**

There was a big boy at school who would tease him because of his hair, because he was small. But the small boy could slip away and lie in the tall grass and hide underneath the steps where no one else could go and the big boy could not find him.

**WHEN HE WAS** feeling very sick and the doctors did not see him anymore, people with smiles came and asked him, "What do you want? You can have anything you want." He didn't feel very good; he was having trouble being small. Big things make it easier.

He wanted the sea.

**HIS MOTHER AND** father wanted to be with him when he went to the beach, but it is easier to be small if you are alone. He wore dark jeans and a dark coat; you are smaller if you are dark.

He stood on the beach in the rain. He felt very sick. The bad thing was out there, very close, looking for him. He held his pebble tightly. *I am small. I am a pebble in this sea.*

And though the bad thing looked and looked, it could not find him.

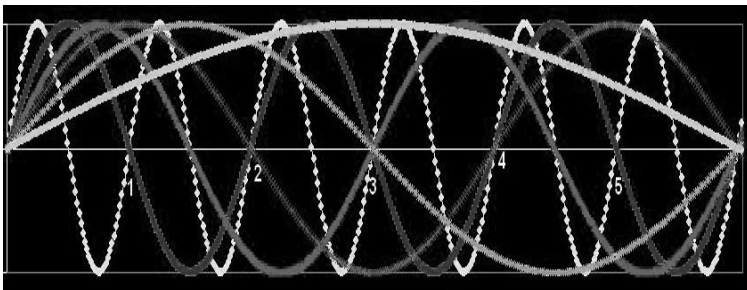
**HIS PARENTS CAME** later, and they could not find him either. They seemed sad, and he wanted to wave to them, to say goodbye, to tell them that it was all right—the bad thing couldn't get him because he was so small. But you are smaller if no one sees you.

**HE PLAYS THERE** still. And though the bad thing searches angrily for him like some strange big boy, it cannot find him. He is as small as a pebble among the thousands in the sea grass, out on the wide empty edge of the sea.

# Appendix: Issues in F&SF Writing

## Good Stories are Multiple Sine Waves

- As I said in my introduction, in real life, shit happens. Human beings *create* meaningful stories about their lives after the fact, usually by ignoring some events to give order to what is left. Our conviction that our lives hang together like coherent stories is the result of our own creativity—it has little to do with reality.
- In published stories, the world hangs together with some coherence from the beginning. In other words, stories feel real because their worlds don't really resemble the shit happens “real” world. In fact, it may be that good stories are compelling because they are structured like we *imagine* the world operates (perhaps the way we *wish* the world operated).
- One way an author violates the chaos of reality and gives her story world a sense of solidity is by having elements from early sections return later. For example, a “throw-away” character early in a story may make an appearance later on. An accident that happens near the beginning may become a continuing theme. Etc.
- Imagine a story as a series of sine waves:



- Each wave represents a different element of a story, and the element returns in the narrative each time its wave crosses the center line:
- A wave crossing the line many times might represent some important aspect of a key character's personality—she is clumsy and each crossing indicates a moment when this shows itself in the story.
- One that crosses only a few times might be a cat that lives in the neighborhood, appearing briefly here and there.
- And perhaps the brightest wave that touches the line only twice, at the beginning and the end, is a theme or an image that helps tie the story together. For example, in “Sphere,” a particular metaphoric image appears both at the start of the story and the end.
- Note how many of these sine waves there are. In a real story there are many more.
- The history of a story slowly builds up as a writer writes. New events and ideas and images contend for space in the growing “memory” of the narrative.
- Note that the “reason” behind these different “returns” is rarely simple in some logical sense to the author. For example, I don't know why the image of the rose repeats at the start and the end of “Sphere,” although I think it works. (An English professor may come along and give a reason; and then another English professor may come along and give a different reason.... And I might respond that I hadn't thought of these reasons before, but that both make sense.)
- Some of these elements may actually make up aspects of the very form of the writing itself. (E.g., in my preface and here in the Appendix I'm using a lot of parenthetical comments. I didn't plan this, originally, but then accepted that it would be a part of the “style” of the writing.)
- If you write a story where there are no sine waves of this kind, where the things that happen early never recur in some way, you will give readers the sense that there is no “story,” that it's just all mishmash. Which is, of course, the way life actually is. (See “Truth is No Excuse,” below.)

- Some stories break the “sine wave” rule intentionally: one aim of such stories may be to help readers *recognize* that the world lacks inherent coherence and narrative. “This is the way the world really is, even though you don’t want to admit it.” Such stories are often somewhat jarring. Some of Grace Paley’s writing feels like this at times.
- When I taught fiction, the “sine wave” metaphor became one of my central teaching tools, in part because it was not dependent upon any particular plot or genre, and in part because it was so basic to any effective story.
- In “Dr. Death,” for example, I believe that I invented Teflon Boy on the fly at the start as I was writing. But once he was in the story, he needed to have some role in it, which I think I figured out fairly soon after sticking him in the story.
- Other examples of characters that I just invented in “Dr. Death” and then needed to “use” include the man with the vest, and the military EMT. Once they appeared, they then returned as very minor sub-plots and needed to have at least some solidity as real people with identifiable personalities. But I didn’t necessarily think about how this would work until it happened as I was writing.
- “Dr. Death” is an interesting example because I wrote it over three days on Memorial Day weekend as part of the Three Day Novel Writing contest. While I had been thinking about this story for years (God knows why) and while I’d done some research (riding on a Greyhound, buying some Sage at the store to remember how it smelled, etc.) I hadn’t otherwise planned it out beyond a basic outline of possible scenes and some compelling images in my mind. So most of the specific details and characters emerged as I was speed-writing. After long years of practice in the old days, I seem to have trained myself to keep track of the growing collection of “sine waves,” automatically bringing these details back as I’m writing.
- I know that some people plan their stories out much more specifically than I tend to. But it’s hard to see how anyone could plan all of these tiny parts out. I’m willing to bet that nearly all

writers have a similar experience of a building pressure of detail as they move forward through a story.

## Truth is no Excuse

- The fact that it “really happened” is meaningless. What matters is if you can convince us it happened.

## The Suddenly Appearing Giants

- In a well-known fantasy series, giants appear half-way through the third book. And it turns out that all the characters in the books knew about giants, while the reader had never heard of them (obviously because the author invented them only half-way through book three).
- Don't do this.
- This kind of clumsy world-building can shatter the illusion that the world the characters are in has any solidity of its own. If you want to add something later, figure out a way to weave it in earlier, or don't add it.
- Note how the sudden appearance of the giants breaks the “sine wave” principle of story writing. It is possible in the real world that no one would have mentioned giants in all the encounters the reader observes, but “Truth is No Excuse.”

## It Should Be There for a Reason

- Stories which introduce elements that later prove largely irrelevant lead the reader to disengagement.\*
- It's okay if you don't know why an element is there *while* you write.
- You don't need a *logical* reason why it's there. You just need to know it's gotta be there. (See: When an Author Totally Understands a Story, It Has Ceased to Be a Story, It's Become an Essay.)

## The Narrative Lump (or Info. Dump)

- Injecting everything the reader needs to know about a new society/world/technology in one (or a few) difficult to digest lumps.
- Solutions:
- Trust your reader to be intelligent.
- Tell less than you know.
- Cut explanations made to help *you* figure out the story—the reader doesn't need to hear these.
- Explain only what *must* be explained.
- Create characters that are ignorant so you can explain things to them.
- But don't be obscure. If we need to know something, you can often just come out and tell us. Don't twist yourself into a pretzel to make the explanation seem invisible (this will just make it stand out).
- Someone on a blog pointed out that “Dr. Death” in this volume is an example of a story that consistently breaks the “avoid narrative lumps” rule.

## “As You Know Bob”

- A pernicious form of info-dump through dialogue: characters tell each other things they already know, for the sake of getting the reader up-to-speed.\*\* (“As you know, Bob, this blaster has three settings.”)

## Great Story Ideas™

- Great ideas for stories are useless unless you can add compelling characters and great writing.
- Crappy ideas can make great stories if they have great characters and/or great writing.
- People who have a “great idea” for a story are the bane of writers. They always want to tell you all about it: “You’re a writer? Well, have I got a great idea for you!” The frequent offering of



“great ideas” by complete strangers is one of the reasons I rarely tell anyone I write fiction

- I don’t know why particular stories are compelling to me, but if your ideas aren’t, it doesn’t matter how great they are. If you think you have a great idea, go write the story yourself. But stop bothering me, because I’m just not interested. I don’t lack ideas, I lack ideas I care about enough to spend an enormous amount of effort writing down. And you are unlikely to come up with an idea that I find compelling, because the ideas I find compelling are often so unlikely to make good stories that you would never come up with them or think they were “great.”
- “Great Story Ideas” that strangers want to regale you about are also almost always about the “furniture” of a story (see “It’s Not About the Furniture,” below).

## **Sometimes Cool Shit Has to Go**

- Because it doesn’t fit *this* story.
- But maybe you can use it some other time.
- Cool shit without a compelling story is actually pretty boring.
- “Sometimes you have to cut the best line in a poem to let it go into orbit,” William Stafford

## **Used Furniture.**

- SF or fantasy background from Central Casting is often chosen by an author too lazy to invent a good one.

## **It’s Not About the Furniture.**

- Converse of above.
- In most stories, the furniture doesn’t actually matter that much.
- Think of the *Twilight* books that sold like hotcakes. Old stock ideas about vampires. It’s the story and the characters that grab people.

## Unnecessary World-Building

- Well-balanced stories have no more world-building than necessary to make the dramatic point.\*
- E.g., “Furniture” that doesn’t serve some purpose only gets in the way.

## Surprise Endings are Usually a Bad Idea

- Surprise payoff stories have mostly “been done.” It’s very difficult to make them work. A surprise payoff cannot save a story without good characters or plot.
- Examples of surprise payoff story: the narrator is actually dead; it was really all a dream; nobody was the murderer, it was just an accident; etc.
- James Allen Gardner notes: “Suspense is not created by keeping secrets from the audience. It’s created by telling the audience everything... except how events will turn out.”<sup>2</sup>
- The point of reading a story is reading a story, not getting to the end.
- “It’s not a mystery story!” Damon once declared to me in exasperation. (Damon, of course, was frequently guilty of breaking this rule himself, but, as he once said in *The Best of Orbit*: “Even if I spit on the sidewalk, it’s still spitting on the sidewalk.”)

## A First-Person Narrator is Always Unreliable

- This took me a while to understand.
- An omniscient narrator is not *in* the story. She sees everything from a fairly objective standpoint.
- The first-person narrator is a perspective *within* the story. Like any person with issues and preferences and relationships and the like, she always sees the world from her own angle. And that means that she’s always, unintentionally, coloring the scene in particular ways. The reader often sees things that the first-person narrator is blind to.
- The logicians among you will point out that *everyone* has a perspective, even the omniscient narrator. Sure. *But this is a story*

*point, not a logic point.* My assertion is that *compelling and believable* first-person narrators are always unreliable. If they are not, they lose some of their power to help us suspend disbelief.

- See “Dr. Death” in this book for a good example of an unreliable narrator. “Being With Jimmy” is a special case, since the first person narrator can also see into the perspectives of the other characters. Nonetheless, he still sees their perspectives from his own perspective.

## Plot Coupons

- These are the basic building blocks of the quest-type fantasy plot. The “hero” collects sufficient plot coupons (magic sword, magic book, magic cat) to send off to the author for the ending.\*\*
- The central plot coupon, e.g., the ring in *The Lord of the Rings*, is sometimes called the “MacGuffin.” Often by the time you actually get (to) the McGuffin, it doesn’t really matter anymore.<sup>3</sup>
- The MacGuffin in “Sphere” is the edge of the world. The MacGuffin in “Jimmy” is getting off the island. (Or at least that’s what I think—as the author I may not be the best person to judge.)

## Aliens Ought to be Alien

- Otherwise why bother?
- At the same time, aliens are most real when they have consistent rules of engagement which operate according to logic not easily visible to the reader, but which is nevertheless clear to the aliens (and to the author).
- Often once you figure out the rules the aliens are following, the aliens immediately become boring. So it’s often a mistake to explain them too much.

## The Rules of Magic

- Magic has to follow rules (whether the reader knows them or not). Chaos isn’t magic, it’s just chaos.

- The magic in “Moments of Grace,” for example, follows clear rules. If it didn’t, some of the emotional power of the story would be lost.

## **The Impossible Event**

- A story can begin with an impossible event. You can’t have any more.
- Sometimes a key aspect of a plot shows how an unbelievable coincidence at the start actually wasn’t a coincidence at all. E.g., the woman he accidentally rescues turns out later to be a planted enemy agent. (Watch out in these cases for too much dependence on the “surprise payoff”—would the story still be compelling even if the reader knew she was a double agent? If not, you probably haven’t got enough story.)

## **Rubber Science**

- This is an explanation which, although probably false according to what we know of the universe, sounds technical and convincing. Rubber science is acceptable in all forms of SF except hard-core hard SF.\*
- In other words, if you don’t really need to come up with a logical reason for the existence of faster-than-light drive, then just do some hand-waving, assert that it is, in fact, possible, and move on to the story.
- Note that in “Dr. Death,” I don’t bother trying to explain the almost-super-powers (this is just a world in which such things exist), but I am very careful to make sure that Death’s killing techniques are true to science (except in one case that the comic book adapter, A. Kaviraj, caught, and that I left in anyway just out of cantankerousness—did you notice?).

## **He Said, She Said**

- The word “said” is invisible to readers. Any other description of how people talk (he blurted out, she coughed, he intimated, ejaculated, etc.) is visible to readers. Use any words besides “said” with great restraint.

- Non “said” words are called “said bookisms.”<sup>4</sup>
- Great dialogue can usually be “heard” as it is meant without needing extra padding. I’m not sure how this is possible, since it’s just inaudible words on the page, but it’s the truth.

## **It’s All About the Verbs**

- Good writing is grounded in good verbs.
- Use adjectives and adverbs sparingly.
- Wish I was better at this.

\* Taken from: “A Glossary of Terms Useful in Critiquing Science Fiction”

\*\* Taken from: “Turkey City Lexicon”

Both are available at: [sfwa.org/writing/](http://sfwa.org/writing/).

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<sup>2</sup> See [thinkage.ca/~jim/prose/suspenseandwithholdinginformation.htm](http://thinkage.ca/~jim/prose/suspenseandwithholdinginformation.htm)

<sup>3</sup> See [http://www.writingclasses.com/FacultyBios/faculty\\_ArticleByInstructor.php/ArticleID/10](http://www.writingclasses.com/FacultyBios/faculty_ArticleByInstructor.php/ArticleID/10)

<sup>4</sup> See [thinkage.ca/~jim/prose/saidbookisms.htm](http://thinkage.ca/~jim/prose/saidbookisms.htm), which provides a nice overview.

**Aaron Schutz** lives in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and hasn't written any fiction since he adopted two (wonderful) daughters, Hiwot and Sheta. He spends a lot of time writing about community organizing and power, and has published two academic books that shall remain nameless, here. His wife Jessica wishes he would clean up his home office, since it's too messy to work in and annoys her by its very existence. But why clean when you can write in coffee shops instead?

(Postscript: since the initial writing of this blurb, Aaron's upstairs office was forcibly taken from him and given to one of his daughters to use as a bedroom. His wife's argument was that he didn't really use it except for sleeping in when the kids invaded their bedroom in the middle of the night and kicked him out, so why did he need it? He was relegated to the basement. Although a bit grumpy initially, he has subsequently realized he actually prefers it down there. So there.)

For those who are interested, Aaron's academic website is: [education-action.org](http://education-action.org).













