



Aurealis Magazine

Decisions, Decisions, Decisions Editorial — Aurealis #32

(the following is based on a presentation to the EnVision Writer's Workshop in Brisbane, July 2003)

So far, I've selected fiction for four issues of Aurealis. All of it (hopefully) good. When I was asked to EnVision to talk about what an editor looks for in a short story, it made me critically re-evaluate the fiction I'd chosen for Aurealis issues #29 to #31. Every one of those stories had — for me — something special, and as I looked at them again, I began to see some common themes arising.

As I told the EnVision Writer's Group, I can't claim to speak for all editors — in fact I've seen stories I've rejected published in other magazines, and good luck to the authors concerned. It's great to see writers persevering and finding a market that's right for their story. But what I plan to do here is provide some insight into the editorial processes that take place within Aurealis — and I do believe some of this will be applicable regardless of the magazine you end up submitting to.

The Aurealis submission process

Aurealis receives over 300 submissions a year. Subscriber submissions are 'fast tracked', i.e. go immediately to the top of the reading pile, but all stories are judged on merit.

Aurealis isn't looking for 'name' writers. We're looking for good stories, regardless of who they're from. A lot of well-known writers today got their start in Aurealis, and we continue that focus of nurturing new talent.

I couldn't get through 300 manuscripts and run the business side of Aurealis alone. Currently we have five readers, most of whom have been with Aurealis for quite a few years. Manuscripts are distributed to them by the submissions manager. We have a tick-and-flick response sheet with a space for comments. All sheets are returned via the submissions manager, who checks them before sending rejected manuscripts and comments back to the writers. Our focus is on positive feedback. We try to identify the story's strengths (sometimes a hard task) and give specific constructive advice on how — in our humble opinion — the story can be improved.

We're not looking for a particular kind of story. Anything goes — as long as it's not sick or pornographic — and with five readers we get a fair diversity of tastes and styles coming through in the selections.

Readers refer stories with potential to me for a final decision. If I need a second opinion, my associate editor Sara Creasy provides me with another viewpoint I know I can trust. Occasionally I will request a rewrite, although I always have to interrogate myself about my reasons for that — which leads me to the following warning...

A word of warning about editors

Contrary to popular belief, editors are human. And that means we can make mistakes, give wrong advice, and generally make huge stuff-ups. So if you get a rejection from an editor and you don't agree with his or her reasons for rejecting your work — ignore it, throw it in the bin, and move on.

But before you do, take a little time to consider the remarks and see if there might be a modicum of truth there. As I said, I really have to question my motives when giving advice on stories. It's easy to say, 'I'd do it this way if it were me', but it's not my story, it's someone else's voice. However, there are a few things that every story has to deliver on.



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The basics

It's fair to say a genre story would need to be very unusual indeed to be selected if it didn't at least make a good attempt at getting some of the basics right — characterisation, dialogue, setting, believability/ internal logic, the entry point of the narrative, and length.

When looking at work, I'm particularly interested in real, believable characters — ordinary people in extraordinary situations. This is supported not only by a believable set of emotional reactions that are used in a consistent way, but also through dialogue that is real — i.e. incomplete, self-referential, and anything but stilted.

Setting is also an area of particular importance to the genre. Writers are creating imaginary worlds and times, and you have to communicate those to the reader in a succinct and evocative way. Sometimes writers rely on the tropes of the genre, the standard language and settings, to help readers — warp drive, castle keep, dungeon, etc. — and if setting isn't the focus of the story you can get away with it if the other aspects are well-realised. But where setting is important, it's crucial to do it well.

Coupled to this are believability and internal logic. Created universes have to be internally consistent. It's fairly obvious that if you set up a series of conventions, you must work within those — unless you come up with a good enough reason for breaking the rules. When it comes to science-based stories, the detail you need to put in has to be finely balanced. Enough to give the reader the idea — and the ability to infer probable causes and effects — but not too much that it slows the pace of the story or becomes preachy or not relevant to the main thrust of the plot. My own understanding of science comes from an early and sustained reading of Marvel comics. For example, I know gamma radiation turns you green and gives you great pecs. I'm sure I've rejected science-based stories as farfetched (even though they may actually be scientifically accurate) because the author hasn't sufficiently explained what I, as the reader, need to know in order to understand the concepts they are using.

Entry point is another common flaw. Some authors feel they need to do a fair bit up front to 'set up' the story situation, but in terms of the short story I really prefer to dive right into the action. Tell me what I need to know as the protagonist is jumping clear of the clutches of a dragon or powering up their disruptor banks for another pass. If you haven't caught the reader's attention or posed a question in their mind in the first page, you're likely to lose them.

The final main point is length. We don't publish anything under 2000 or over 8000 words — as a rule. I have published longer pieces — 'On The Road to Ruin' (Greg Guerin) in #31 is one example — but pieces that long really need to be able to hold the attention and pace. I have published shorter pieces — 'A Nun's Story' (Helen Patrice) and 'The Last Monk' (George Ivanoff) in #30 — but short shorts need to be incredibly well-written in terms of conveying a lot of content, feeling and so on, in a very short space.

Another common problem area is lack of sufficient fantasy or SF elements. We are a fantasy and SF mag. I always remember a line in Analog's submission guidelines. I don't know if it's still there but it went something like — in SF stories the SF element needs to be a central part of the story: try thinking of Frankenstein without the science. The whole story would collapse without it.

My own personal quirks

As well as fixing up the basics, you also have to satisfy the market — in this case Aurealis, so this is where I reveal some of my own personal foibles. Remember, these will vary from editor to editor and market to market — it's unfortunately the nature of the beast, but it also makes for magazines with very different flavours. I'd encourage anyone thinking of submitting a story to a local mag to buy a few back issues — not only because as independent



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press we need the money (and deserve the support), but because you will learn something of what is likely to sell in that market.

I'll give some idea of what guides my selection processes now, and back them with some examples of stories I've selected for Aurealis issues #29 to #31.

The original(!) idea or Using the tropes in a new way

This is real bread and butter stuff. The speculative fiction genre, to my mind, engages the intellect of the reader like no other.

In SF, for example, we project the reader forward into the future. Extrapolation and idea development is the key. The most common form of this type of story posits a scientific development and plots the ramifications on society at large or a defined social grouping. Normally this is told through the eyes of a protagonist who brings a human element to the change or upheaval brought about. Think of Greg Bear's *Blood Music* as a prime example of this type of story. These kinds of stories are what got me interested in the genre in the first place, and it still gives me chills when I come across a piece that has that smack of originality. Equally, the core proposition of the story may not be all that original or even new, but the author's portrayal breathes new life into it — which I think is a pretty special skill in itself.

There are a number of Aurealis stories that fit this category. 'Profit Motive' (Steve de Beer, #31) is a hard science story that also manages to create believable alien characters — the opportunistic crew of the good ship Profit Motive — as well as spinning a tale of greed in a future where the corporations control everything. All very entertaining, but the driving idea is the incredibly detailed and, apparently, scientifically valid method to soft-land a huge ice comet in central Australia. The concept is as audacious as the story's protagonist, and just as well realised.

The idea of humans enhanced by cybernetic implants is a stock one in SF. But in 'The Touch of Silk' (#29), Robert N Stephenson manipulated the tropes so well, creating in a very short space a complex social structure, a history for that society spanning thousands of years and a battle for the hearts and minds of the people based on a mundane (to us, at least) artefact used as proof of their origins. The way this central idea was revealed shocked me and made me laugh at the same time. All of this was set as background to a fast-paced chase story where no one was as they seemed. It was a godsend.

'Lucy Lucy' (Shane M Brown, #29) takes the familiar concept of human cloning and projects us into a near future where the majority of women have been killed by a fem-plague. To ensure the survival of the race, the surviving women have been cloned tens of thousands of times. The story centres on one particular Lucy clone and extrapolates out in all directions based on her point of view — for example, her hatred of being accosted by people because they always think they know what Lucys like and are like, and her obsessive search through abandoned houses looking for photographs and memorabilia of 'real' and 'different' pre fem-plague women. There's a wealth of ideas here, including the main thread that reveals the awful truth about Lucys — all internally consistent and well-written.

'Wind Down' (Trent Jamieson, #30) again takes familiar tropes but throws them together in new ways — eternal humans who grow their bodies to suit any environment, living ships, the slow wait for the end of the universe. The central premise contrasts these 'alien' elements of the future against a very human, and in its own way eternal, love story of loss and acceptance. I think it was that very human element surviving millions of years after the heat death of Earth that sold me on the story.

'Reefer Madness' (Patricia O'Neill, #31) stood out as a truly original — and bizarre — scientific idea. It revolves around the creation of genetically modified humans who get fat



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on sunlight and actually metabolise carbon dioxide from the environment. They're the human equivalent of carbon sink forests and they get a government subsidy for their trouble. One teenage girl rebels against her genetic heritage and seeks out illegal medical help to remove the modifications. Given the characterisation and setting were solid, I accepted it almost instantly.

The transformational story

If the previous type of story engaged the intellect, this category of story speaks to our spiritual and emotional side. Stories of this type show a character coming to a new understanding or making a discovery that results in their 'transformation', or at least infers one past the end of the narrative. I think this is something that the genre handles really well — and given many stories confront the protagonist with the alien or unknown, it's inevitable (unless the character is carved out of stone) that they undergo some kind of transformation as a result, or come to a revelation about themselves or the nature of the universe around them. I really have a soft spot for these stories because they're messengers of the potential within human beings to change — they're hopeful pieces that (as I've said in a previous editorial) represent my personal touchstone for the essence of speculative fiction.

'The Nun's Story' (Helen Patrice, #30) is a pure transformational story — and after it appeared in Aurealis, it was listed by Ellen Datlow as an honourable mention in the Year's Best Fantasy and Science Fiction. Sister Luke is a young girl approaching adulthood, serving as assistant to her abusive father, a self-styled evangelist, toiling to convert to Christianity a group of avian creatures on an alien planet. Sister Luke's early childhood and the flight (or possible murder) of her mother and siblings is very lightly handled through dream remembrances, which reveal more to the reader than the poor girl seems to understand. It's as if she knows something is wrong about her situation, but doesn't know what. She has too much faith in what her father tells her. But when she sees one of the young avians grow its wings and begin to fly, she realises more on an instinctual level how right the avians' way of life is, how much she wants to be a part of that, and how sordid and earthbound her father's own pretensions really are. The story speaks on a real emotional level and as such it had a great strength that couldn't be ignored.

'The Touch of Silk' (Robert N Stephenson, #29) also had a very strong transformational theme. Both the main characters have on the surface come to the end of their usefulness, being unable to afford the upgrades that mean their cyborg bodies can continue to serve those in power. Tasha is on the run from the Reclaimers and hooks up with Henry, who is himself close to a total shutdown. But Henry has a secret that strikes at the very core of the ruling faction's belief system. When Henry is badly injured helping Tasha escape, he asks her to do what must be done to preserve the truth. Her acceptance of this task and her promise to herself as she leaves is one of those moments in fiction that evokes (at least for me) a strong emotional response. I still get goose bumps.

'The Well of Waiting Souls' (Mina Athanasopoulos, #30) has a large back story that is deftly handled without slowing the pace. It also starts right in the action, which kicks it along from the first sentence. The story concerns a second child being blighted by what appears to be a 'family curse'. Isan is one of the Templars, spirit singers who use their powers to heal, among other things. Isan has a complex history with the family, having failed to save their first child years before and surrendering to an affair with the husband, Dash Jaspari. But the source of the curse goes back even farther than that, and is tied to the genocide of an alien race by the child's great grandfather. Many of the characters confront ugly truths about themselves or their loved ones as the story progresses and the family's guilt is finally revealed during an exorcism to save the child. By this point we have a deep understanding of Isan's history and motivations. So much so that the shock we feel — when the narrative takes



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a twist and she sacrifices herself to a visceral transformation — is quickly followed by the understanding that, being the person she is, she had no other choice.

The well-written or ‘I just like it’ story

Yes, this is my catch-all category. But then nobody said story selection always has to follow logical rules. Sometimes I find a story that’s well-written, well-paced and entertaining and, well, I just like it. The idea behind it may not be particularly original or new even, but the way it’s told demands my attention. This is more to do with the author as skilled storyteller than anything else. The pieces just flow so well, they’re hard to reject.

Being an editor means you can indulge yourself — so long as the consumer agrees with your taste. Adam Browne is a real prose stylist. Some people don’t like his approach, but I always find his use of language entertaining, humorous, and juxtaposed in such a way that it demands the reader think about what they’re reading. Luckily, enough of the reading public agrees with me. We published ‘The Weatherboard Spaceship’ in #27/28 and it won an Aurealis Award that year. It’s not to say that I haven’t rejected work by Adam — the story still has to meet the magazine’s requirements and my own internal logic — but when all the elements I’m looking for are present, it’s pretty hard to reject one of Adam’s pieces. The premise for ‘Space Operetta’ (#31) was to create the universe in an Aristotelian model rather than a Copernican one. This has been thought of before, as Adam noted in a short piece he wrote to add to the story in the mag, but Adam realised the idea so completely — conjuring up clockwork constellations and populating the heavens with improbable ships plying a course to change zodiacal perturbations and affect the destiny of nations — that the whole thing was an absolute joy to read.

A honeymoon couple on holiday at a seaside resort. The husband falls ill and seems to be in a coma. We discover he has fallen victim to a camera that captures the soul of whoever is photographed by it. This sounds like a very familiar story. And it was, but it was made much more unusual by the skilful characterisation of one Father Muerte, the description of a very unusual holiday resort called Costa Satanás, and a supporting cast of colourful characters — all of whom are more than they appear. Lee Battersby’s creation (‘Father Muerte and the Theft’, #29) had great atmosphere — comfortable, entertaining and satisfying. While the main story may be mundane, he sets up all sorts of questions in the mind of the reader about Father Muerte, Costa Satanás and the other inhabitants, and provides some tantalising answers that leave you begging for more. This story just felt like an instant classic. And since we published it, I’ve been badgering Lee to produce further instalments.

‘Catflap’ (Chuck McKenzie, #30) similarly had story elements that lovers of the genre would recognise instantly. A cold war between Earth and a violent alien race is raging. Earth’s defences are impenetrable... until a greedy and unprincipled entrepreneur negotiates a commercial opportunity and unwittingly allows the aliens to smuggle their eggs onto Earth. Again, it was the perfect characterisation, the creation of the alien creatures, their complex social and biological structure, and a lot of very funny dialogue that raised this story above the mundane and made for an entertaining and satisfying read.

A word about rewrites

So I’ve explained some of my personal quirks regarding story selection. I’d like to expand a bit on rewrites. As I mentioned earlier, I’m always very wary about suggesting rewrites. Firstly because you’re tampering with someone else’s idea and you have to really question your motives for that. Secondly, by requesting a rewrite you’re half-committing yourself to publishing the story if it’s fixed up in the way you suggest, so you have to be pretty sure that the story — although not good enough at present — has the potential to be good enough.

To a certain extent, that goes to the capacity of the author. Generally with known authors, it’s a bit easier to do this. They’ve been around the traps and they’ve probably had



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rewrite requests before and will be able to deal with suggestions in a professional manner. Relatively inexperienced authors may need a bit more help and then you have to question whether you really have the time to invest. Again that depends on the potential of the story. Of course some authors may react quite badly to your suggestions. I haven't experienced that directly yet, but at the back of my mind is the thought that it's just a matter of time.

To try and focus any thoughts I have of suggesting a rewrite, I look at a story structurally from the point of view of a reader who has shelled out \$12.50 for a copy of the mag. That helps me to see if the story drags in places, if it explains enough but not too much so the reader understands and sees significance where they should but doesn't feel they're being talked down to, and if the resolution is strong enough and 'satisfying' within the context of what has gone before. If I can see structural faults, I'll certainly highlight them, whether or not I request a rewrite.

'The Tower' (Neil Halliday, #30) concerns a tourist trip to a huge alien artifact — a kilometres-high crystal tower that defies all human engineering concepts. The story also mixes together quite effectively human remembrances of the Tower of Babylon and Jacob's ladder. It's hard to explain, but the idea behind it was intriguing and we've since had a lot of very positive comments about it. This was one instance where I requested a rewrite — on structural grounds. As I said, the idea was strong and the writing was polished, but the original submission was told in the second person — you this, you that — an interesting experiment, but it wasn't working. I felt it would be too jarring to the reader to hear 'you feel this, you do that' all the time, and they'd probably end up thinking 'no, I don't' every time they came across it. The technique also meant we had limited access to the main protagonist — you can't easily reveal personal details about the character, because 'you' effectively already know them. I made some comments, Neil took them on board and — at my encouragement — also took his time.

This, I think, is critical if you're going to accept suggestions from other people. Your story is organic — it's developed over several rewrites prior to submission — and if you don't take the time to let the external suggestions grow into your work, and alter them in the process, then the 'graft' won't take. In other words, rushed changes will stand out like the proverbial sore thumb. Some months later, Neil resubmitted and the rewrite was perfect — not only told in the third person, but also adding much more detail on the protagonist, which was crucial since the nub of the story is the tower's effect on the main character.

Conclusion

So there you have it, short story selection Aurealis-style. As I said in the beginning, every magazine is different. At Aurealis, we look for a mixture of originality and good craft, and as you'd see there's a fair bit of subjectivity (guided, we hope, by sound knowledge of the genre and good judgement) in what finally makes it into print.

What this all boils down to is three final pieces of advice to authors. Write what feels right for you — don't tailor your work to fit in with what you think is in an editor's mind because it won't be your best work. Know your markets — know what's likely to sell to which magazine. You can save yourself a lot of time that way. And finally, never stop writing or submitting — good craft comes with practice, and good stories will always find a home.

Here's to the future.

Keith