



Anchors in Reality

By

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Fiction writing is unique among the various forms of written communication. Most writing is intended to impart information to the reader, to educate. Whether you are reading an instruction on how to bake an angel food cake in a cookbook, or perusing your local newspaper to determine the previous evening's tally of murder and mayhem, the purpose is to present you with a constant stream of facts for processing by that 50-watt organic computer located between your ears. And since their intent is to inform, writers of encyclopedias, newspapers, cookbooks, computer manuals, and most school textbooks all work in approximately the same way. They present facts to the reader in a clear, logical, and linear fashion. They strive for clarity and balance, with a minimum of literary affectation.

There are other types of writing, of course. Advertising and political writing are intended less to inform than to persuade. Often clarity and an informed consumer of information (whether car buyer or potential voter) are the last things a writer-persuader wants. These artists strive to maximize the emotional impact of their writing while downplaying the information content. They are out to win you over to their own point of view by highlighting facts that are supportive of their thesis and ignoring those that are not. As a wise man once said, "All is fair in love, war, and advertising ... at least until the Federal Trade Commission catches up with you."

Fiction writing is related to persuasion writing in that fiction is intended to work primarily on the reader's emotions. However, it is *not* persuasion writing for the simple reason that it isn't usually trying to overtly persuade you of anything – except, possibly, that it would be nice if you ran right out and bought another of the author's books. In fact, combining fiction with overt persuasion (in other words, propaganda) is one of the most difficult of all writing tasks. If done poorly, the persuading ruins the fiction. [I just watched *The American President*, with Michael Douglas and Annette Bening, on cable TV for the first time last week. This is a beautifully photographed and acted movie and an appealing love story onto which has been grafted a political message with which I am not personally attuned. In fact, the propaganda was so ham fisted that I had to watch the movie in three different sittings because I kept turning it off in disgust. I'm sure that wasn't the intent of the director.]

So if a fiction writer isn't attempting to inform or to persuade, just what the heck *is* he or she trying to do? Simple, really. A fiction writer is trying to hypnotize and brainwash the reader.

Consider, if you will, the act of reading. Better yet, have you ever wondered what your dog thinks you are doing when you read a book? *Master has been sitting in that chair for three hours now, staring at a sheaf of white paper, giggling insanely. Dinner is going to be late tonight!* Even if they could talk, it is unlikely that you could ever explain reading to a dog. Television, yes – reading, no!

The fact is that reading is about as unnatural an act as one can imagine. You sit in a quiet room, stare at a piece of paper with random black marks sprayed across its face, and within seconds, are transported to someone else's body in another place and time. That is the difference between reading fiction and reading for information. When you read fiction, you enter a hypnotic state in which you largely block the nerve impulses from your physical body until you are oblivious to the world around you. We've all experienced this self-induced dreamlike trance in which you literally lock yourself inside the confines of your own brain. Remember being so deeply into a story that you lose all track of time and your surroundings? Have you ever been startled back to reality when someone who has been trying to attract your attention finally touches you on the shoulder?

In science fiction, the thrill that accompanies this loss of reality during reading is called the "sense of wonder." In fact, the sense of wonder is the primary reason most of us caught the SF bug in the first place. Nor is it limited to the science fiction ghetto. The sense of wonder pervades all fiction. It is the narcotic that brings the readers back for more, and ultimately, puts food on a writer's table. So, like all good drug pushers, we need to perfect our craft in order to get the maximum number of innocent victims hooked on our highly addictive product.

And even though the trance into which a reader falls is largely self-induced, the ability of a reader to perform this bit of autohypnosis is dependent on the skill of the writer. The better a writer is, the more quickly the readers enter that hypnotic state where they forget their own identity and largely surrender control of their central nervous system to the writer's words. So this month's article is about the fine art of brainwashing through use of the written word. In brainwashing, as in all forms of laundry, there are some simple techniques that, if followed, will produce a cleaner product.

Anchors in Reality

The human mind is a complex and wonderful instrument. However, that very complexity makes it possible to manipulate the mind without the conscious knowledge of the person who inhabits it. If you don't believe this is true, try visiting a used car dealership sometime. Every word the salesman utters, every move he makes, is a carefully crafted act of manipulation. His goal is to maneuver you into parting with some of your hard-earned money. The customer-salesman minuet is a mating dance as classic as the most revered ballet. That is why the experience of buying a used car is essentially the same the world over. Salesmen are students of human psychology, and many are better practitioners of the art than licensed psychologists.

Just as a salesman has his techniques for playing mind games with you, so it is with writers of fiction. Consider for a moment the following simple model of the human brain: The brain receives information through a series of remote sensors (eyes, ears, nose,

skin), evaluates that information, and then initiates the proper responses in its owner's body. Since it is merely a processor of information, the brain treats similar information similarly, no matter the source. If all of this seems unnecessarily obscure, consider the reaction most men have upon reading a description of a beautiful woman. It is essentially the same reaction (although not as intense) as the one they have when they actually *see* a beautiful woman – and no, I'm not talking about *that reaction*. I'm referring to the general response of the male glandular system to a sufficiently realistic description of a beautiful woman. The same is true with women and babies, and indeed, for almost every stimulus-response equation we have hard wired into our psyches. In other words, the brain receives information through the medium of the printed word and reacts to that information as though it were having an actual experience.

This is the basis for a literary technique known as “planting an anchor in reality,” which is basically peppering your writing with short passages of prose that appeal to the reader's five senses. For example, “*The horse wended its way among brown tree trunks beneath an emerald canopy and pale-blue sky. Occasionally the wind would tug at the rider's clothes as it plucked at the exposed hairs on the back of his hands. The wind brought with it the cool, clean smell of pine needles and an occasional acrid whiff of smoke from the distant campfire. In his mind's eye he could see the pale, yellow flames sputtering beneath the blackened coffee pot, while heat chased the chill from his cheeks, and the crackling pop of the embers echoed in the ears of his imagination.*”

By appealing to the physical senses, the writer is manipulating the reader's subconscious mind and thereby disguising the very unnatural act of reading. By triggering the memories of what pine needles and wood smoke smell like, and how it feels to have the wind ruffle the hairs on the back of one's hand, the writer aids the reader in his quest for that semi-hypnotic state known as losing one's self in the story. The absorbed reader's brain has been largely disconnected from its external sensors. Even the eyes are unseeing, save for the black marks on the white paper on which they are concentrating. We've all seen the look of concentration on someone's face when they are absorbed in reading. We recognize the state primarily by the blank stare they give us should they happen to look up from their book.

Into this state of sensory deprivation steps the writer and his or her physical descriptions of the environment of the story. Having essentially cut itself off from its normal sensory inputs, the reader's brain absorbs these stimuli and acts on them as though they were real. You, the reader, are magically transported from your easy chair to somewhere else: You find yourself shooting the rapids of a treacherous river, or cowering in a muddy foxhole as artillery shells explode around you, or riding a sweating pony hard to keep ahead of a band of screaming savages, or sitting on a moonlit beach with your arm around your paramour.

And, in a sense, these sensations are as real as if you were indeed shooting the rapids or being chased by savages. That is because your body reacts the same as it would in the actual situation, although usually without the same intensity. While reading you find your breathing getting faster, your heart beating a little harder, and a small jolt of adrenaline flowing through your bloodstream. You feel joy, sorrow, dismay, and exhilaration, sometimes in the space of just a scant few minutes. And all of this is due to the autonomic response we have to reading the description of a fictional environment or

situation. The words on paper become real people, real dangers, and real problems. We have, in essence, conjured something from out of nothing.

Nor is any of this happening on a conscious level. The reaction takes place deep within our minds, down where we feel rather than think. We are largely unaware of the process as we follow the adventures of a hero who has somehow become us. We read and we experience life at its vicarious best, never once noting the anchors in reality as we absorb them one after another. Like Cupid's arrows, each builds on the last, convincing us ever more strongly that what we are reading is real. Our belief in that reality grows strong precisely because it is subconscious. It is below the level in our minds where we usually analyze things, and therefore, we don't even try to analyze the reaction. We just follow the small clues blindly, usually not even noticing their presence.

Manipulating Readers' Psyches for Fun and Profit

If planting these "anchors in reality" in your story seems difficult, it isn't. In fact, the ability is almost instinctual once you have practiced it. Many writers set each scene by giving a physical description of the point-of-view character's surroundings. This not only helps orient the readers, it progressively hardens the readers' conviction that the story is real, driving them ever deeper into their self induced trance.

Poul Anderson, one of the best science fiction writers of the 60's and 70's, has been often quoted on this subject. His technique is to go through a manuscript and make sure that he has an appeal to the senses on every page. In this way he gives the reader a continuous flow of sensory information to satisfy the inwardly focused brain, reducing the possibility that some external stimulus might penetrate the wall of concentration the reader has thrown up around himself.

In previous articles I have expressed my admiration for the writing of both Herman Wouk and Tom Clancy. Two incidents in their writing will always stand out in my memory. The first occurs early in *The Winds of War*. Wouk is describing a street scene in Berlin in the late 1930's. The street is decorated for a Nazi parade, and hung from the lampposts are a series of swastika-bedecked flags. They are all red, with a white circle and the black swastika imprinted at their center. And they are manufactured of cheesecloth to allow the wind to flow through the weave in order that they will hang straight, with less fluttering. Because of the loose weave of the cloth, the flags are translucent.

This one small detail was all that it took for me to be transported bodily to the streets of pre-war Berlin, to stand on the sidewalk and look across the cobblestones at those flags hanging down from the lamp posts, with the buildings beyond dimly visible through their open weave. By telling me that the flags were semi-transparent, Wouk sank an anchor so deeply into my reality that I was pinned fast to it.

The second scene that sticks vividly in my memory comes from Tom Clancy's *Red Storm Rising*, a book that is, in my opinion, very nearly a classic. The Russian general who is one of the main characters is riding a train and the sound the train makes as it moves down the tracks is *thud-thud-thud*. The reason for this, Clancy explains, is that the Russians lay their rails evenly, not staggered as is done in the United States.

Because the iron wheels of the train reach the joints simultaneously, you get the *thud-thud* sound rather than the *clickity-clack* of western railroads.

Again, this is a minor physical detail that utterly convinced me that I was in the story and not sprawled out on my living room couch. I *was* that Russian general. I *was* riding that train.

Other readers, of course, may not have reacted to those particular anchors the way I did. Not to worry, however. If a writer is good at his or her craft, and if they put enough such anchors in the story, sooner or later every reader will stumble across the one that performs that vital convincing function for them. It can be anything: the flecks of rust on a medieval knight's suit of armor; the image of the setting sun reflected in the polished side of a black, 1920's touring car; or the funny brown smudge on the end of the heroine's nose after changing her automobile's tire. Nor is the sense of sight the only one. Eliciting the memory of favorite smells in the reader, or reminding them of the feel of a loved one's caress are especially effective. So, too, are the sound of rain on a roof or the staccato chirping of crickets on a moonlit night.

By providing sufficient physical details of the story, by appealing to the reader's glandular reactions below the level of thinking, eventually we reach the point where we have convinced them that the picture in their heads is as real as the one in front of their eyes. When we have done this, we have placed them in that dreamlike state of concentration that allows their sense of wonder free reign. It is only when we have them wrapped in a warm cloak of dreams that we have succeeded at our jobs as writers of fiction. And having placed our readers in a state of responsiveness, it is our duty to never do anything to jar them out of it. As we all know, nothing is more disconcerting for being pulled bodily out of nice, warm fog just as we are getting to the good part. I, for one, become extremely irritated when this happens to me. You, I am sure, react similarly.

So while writing your story, remember to use plenty of anchors in reality and to never say anything so stupid that your readers will be forced from their willing suspension of disbelief. Our motto should be, "Once we have them hypnotized, keep them hypnotized! That way they will come back for a taste of our particular brand of opiate. In the end, isn't that what it's all about?"

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The End

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The Makers searched for the secret to faster-than-light travel for 100,000 years. Their chosen instruments were the Life Probes, which they launched in every direction to seek out advanced civilizations among the stars. One such machine searching for intelligent life encounters 21st century Earth. It isn't sure that it has found any...

2. Procyon's Promise - ^{US}\$4.50

Three hundred years after humanity made its deal with the Life Probe to search out the secret of faster-than-light travel, the descendants of the original expedition return to Earth in a starship. They find a world that has forgotten the ancient contract. No matter. The colonists have overcome far greater obstacles in their single-minded drive to redeem a promise made before any of them were born...

3. Antares Dawn - US\$4.50

When the super giant star Antares exploded in 2512, the human colony on Alta found their pathway to the stars gone, isolating them from the rest of human space for more than a century. Then one day, a powerful warship materialized in the system without warning. Alarmed by the sudden appearance of such a behemoth, the commanders of the Altan Space Navy dispatched one of their most powerful ships to investigate. What ASNS Discovery finds when they finally catch the intruder is a battered hulk manned by a dead crew.

That is disturbing news for the Altans. For the dead battleship could easily have defeated the whole of the Altan navy. If it could find Alta, then so could whomever it was that beat it. Something must be done...

4. Antares Passage - US\$4.50

After more than a century of isolation, the paths between stars are again open and the people of Alta in contact with their sister colony on Sandar. The opening of the foldlines has not been the unmixed blessing the Altans had supposed, however.

For the reestablishment of interstellar travel has brought with it news of the Ryall, an alien race whose goal is the extermination of humanity. If they are to avoid defeat at the hands of the aliens, Alta must seek out the military might of Earth. However, to reach Earth requires them to dive into the heart of a supernova.

5. Antares Victory – First Time in Print – US\$7.00

After a century of warfare, humanity finally discovered the Achilles heel of the Ryall, their xenophobic reptilian foe. Spica – Alpha Virginis – is the key star system in enemy space. It is the hub through which all Ryall starships must pass, and if humanity can only capture and hold it, they will strangle the Ryall war machine and end their threat to humankind forever.

It all seemed so simple in the computer simulations: Advance by stealth, attack without warning, strike swiftly with overwhelming power. Unfortunately, conquering the Ryall proves the easy part. With the key to victory in hand, Richard and Bethany Drake discover that they must also conquer human nature if they are to bring down the alien foe ...

6. Thunderstrike! - US\$6.00

The new comet found near Jupiter was an incredible treasure trove of water ice and rock. Immediately, the water-starved Luna Republic and the Sierra Corporation, a leader in asteroid mining, were squabbling over rights to the new resource. However, all thoughts of profit and fame were abandoned when a scientific expedition discovered that the comet's trajectory placed it on a collision course with Earth!

As scientists struggled to find a way to alter the comet's course, world leaders tried desperately to restrain mass panic, and two lovers quarreled over the direction the comet was to take, all Earth waited to see if humanity had any future at all...

7. The Clouds of Saturn - US\$4.50

When the sun flared out of control and boiled Earth's oceans, humanity took refuge in a place that few would have predicted. In the greatest migration in history, the entire human race took up residence among the towering clouds and deep clear-air canyons of Saturn's upper atmosphere. Having survived the traitor star, they returned to the all-too-human tradition of internecine strife. The new city-states of Saturn began to resemble those of ancient Greece, with one group of cities taking on the role of militaristic Sparta...

8. The Sails of Tau Ceti – US\$4.50

Starhopper was humanity's first interstellar probe. It was designed to search for intelligent life beyond the solar system. Before it could be launched, however, intelligent life found Earth. The discovery of an alien light sail inbound at the edge of the solar system generated considerable excitement in scientific circles. With the interstellar probe nearing completion, it gave scientists the opportunity to launch an expedition to meet the aliens while they were still in space. The second surprise came when *Starhopper's* crew boarded the alien craft. They found beings that, despite their alien physiques, were surprisingly compatible with humans. That two species so similar could have evolved a mere twelve light years from one another seemed too coincidental to be true.

One human being soon discovered that coincidence had nothing to do with it...

9. Gibraltar Earth – First Time in Print — \$6.00

It is the 24th Century and humanity is just gaining a toehold out among the stars. Stellar Survey Starship *Magellan* is exploring the New Eden system when they encounter two alien spacecraft. When the encounter is over, the score is one human scout ship and one alien aggressor destroyed. In exploring the wreck of the second alien ship, spacers discover a survivor with a fantastic story.

The alien comes from a million-star Galactic Empire ruled over by a mysterious race known as the Broa. These overlords are the masters of this region of the galaxy and they allow no competitors. This news presents Earth's rulers with a problem. As yet, the Broa are ignorant of humanity's existence. Does the human race retreat to its one small world, quaking in fear that the Broa will eventually discover Earth? Or do they take a more aggressive approach?

Whatever they do, they must do it quickly! Time is running out for the human race...

10. Gibraltar Sun – First Time in Print — \$7.00

The expedition to the Crab Nebula has returned to Earth and the news is not good. Out among the stars, a million systems have fallen under Broan domination, the fate awaiting Earth should the Broa ever learn of its existence. The problem would seem to allow but three responses: submit meekly to slavery, fight and risk extermination, or hide and pray the Broa remain ignorant of humankind for at least a few more generations. Are the hairless apes of Sol III finally faced with a problem for which there is no acceptable solution?

While politicians argue, Mark Rykand and Lisa Arden risk everything to spy on the all-powerful enemy that is beginning to wonder at the appearance of mysterious bipeds in their midst...

11. Gridlock and Other Stories - US\$4.50

Where would you visit if you invented a time machine, but could not steer it? What if you went out for a six-pack of beer and never came back? If you think nuclear power is dangerous, you should try black holes as an energy source — or even scarier, solar energy! Visit the many worlds of Michael McCollum. I guarantee that you will be surprised!

Non-Fiction Books

12. The Art of Writing, Volume I - US\$10.00

Have you missed any of the articles in the Art of Writing Series? No problem. The first sixteen articles (October, 1996-December, 1997) have been collected into a book-length work of more than 72,000 words. Now you can learn about character, conflict, plot, pacing, dialogue, and the business of writing, all in one document.

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16. The Astrogator's Handbook – Expanded Edition and Deluxe Editions

The Astrogator's Handbook has been very popular on Sci Fi – Arizona. The handbook has star maps that show science fiction writers where the stars are located in space rather than where they are located in Earth's sky. Because of the popularity, we are expanding the handbook to show nine times as much space and more than ten times as many stars. The expanded handbook includes the positions of 3500 stars as viewed from Polaris on 63 maps. This handbook is a useful resource for every science fiction writer and will appeal to anyone with an interest in astronomy.