



Incidental Characters

By
Michael McCollum



Possibly the worst fortnight in the latter half of the twentieth century was the ten days that ended November 1963. Not only was John F. Kennedy assassinated on November 22, but I also had to go to work for the first time on November 29. As I said, a bad ending to what had otherwise been a pretty good month.

The job I obtained was the same one that has introduced millions of American high school students to the wonderful world of work: hamburger flipping. Through someone that my father knew, I was hired at the Scottsdale Burger Chef in Scottsdale, Arizona, for the princely sum of \$0.90 per hour (later raised to a nice, even \$1.00 per hour). In those days McDonald's wasn't the powerhouse they later became. In fact, those of us who worked for Burger Chef actually looked down on our counterparts at the golden arches.

I was still at the Scottsdale Burger Chef three years later in September 1966, and frankly, I was getting sick of the place. My usual shift was Thursday through Saturday nights, then all day Sunday. This did not aid my social life one iota. I remember one particular Thursday night that September with considerable fondness, however. The date was September 8, 1966, and I had the night off because I wanted to see the debut of a new science fiction television show by an unknown producer named Gene Roddenberry. The show was *Star Trek*. (For those of you who like *Star Trek* trivia, the first episode broadcast was not the first episode filmed. Rather, it was the third. The episode was titled "The Man Trap." It was the one in which an alien monster hypnotizes its victims into seeing whatever they most desire, then attacks and sucks all of the salt out of their bodies. I have always referred to it as the "salt sucking" episode.)

Star Trek quickly enchanted me. The production values, while cheesy by today's computer enhanced standards, were so much better than anything television had done before that I was converted into a devoted follower within minutes. Besides, the other science fiction series on the air in 1966 was *Lost In Space*. While it, too, showed great promise in its first few episodes, by that September it had largely devolved into the "Danger, Will Robinson!" parody that everyone remembers.

Like everyone else who watched that first night, I had no idea the program would evolve into a major cultural icon. Nor did I find it remarkable when, a few minutes into the first episode, the salt monster enticed a member of Captain Kirk's landing party out behind a big rock where it sucked all of the salt out of him. That incident evolved into a pattern that seems to pervade *Star Trek* episodes; so much so, in fact, that comics have

been making jokes about it for decades. Most of you will have no difficulty recognizing the scene.

EPISODE 12, SCENE 3: INTERIOR VIEW OF THE ENTERPRISE TRANSPORTER ROOM

William Shatner (Captain Kirk), Leonard Nimoy (Mr. Spock), and De Forest Kelly (Dr. McCoy) gather in the transporter room in preparation for beaming down to the planet's surface. An unknown actor wearing a red uniform accompanies them. Shatner and Nimoy take the down stage transporter positions and Kelly and the unknown actor take the up stage positions. The quartet dematerializes in a shimmering sparkle of light.

There are two things you know when you see the shore party gathering in the transporter room aboard the starship *Enterprise*. The first is that the captain and the senior officers will be leading the expedition into some hazardous environment in defiance of both military tradition and even a modicum of good sense. The other thing you know is that the nameless crewman in the red uniform isn't coming back. He will either be attacked by the salt monster, step on an exploding rock, be sucked up by a carnivorous plant, or be beamed into incandescence by an irate Klingon.

The nameless, hapless crewman in the red uniform is what is known as an incidental character. He's the disposable BIC lighter of the starship's crew, the expendable pawn in the great game of galactic chess, the poor fool who must die in order to give William Shatner another opportunity to overact his part. The reason we don't recognize the actor is that he isn't very well known. Since he won't be around long enough to reach the first commercial, the producers have no need to be extravagant when casting the part. They cast unknowns for the simple reason that they will work for union scale. It is, after all, a bit part, often without lines. Basically, anyone can play cannon fodder. All they need do is fit the costume.

Despite the fact that they are disposable, you make a mistake if you think incidental characters aren't important in the world of literature. Like set and scenery, they contribute mightily to the atmosphere of the story being told. And though they are not on the scene long, or have many (if any) lines, how well a director or writer handles their incidental characters often determines the quality of the story being told. Just as protagonist and antagonist perform their respective functions in the story, so too do incidental characters. The techniques a writer uses to breathe life into his or her incidental characters is our subject in this chapter.

The Purpose of Incidental Characters

Having had a little fun with Gene Roddenberry and William Shatner in the introduction, let us continue our consideration of that unknown thespian in the red uniform and the function he/she performs on *Star Trek, The Original Series*. First and foremost, of course, these people are expendable. They are added to the plot for the sole purpose of being expended.

There is an old rule in writing: If you want to convince the readers you are serious, kill someone on the first page. Robert Heinlein, the dean of science fiction, used this technique so often and so well that most of the rest of us are afraid to use it lest we be accused of plagiarism. Still, if you want to pull the readers into your story quickly, there

are few better ways than to kill someone right before their eyes. Death tends to cause our brains to shut down their rational faculties and go straight for the frightened little boy/girl that lurks down in our subconscious minds. This reaction is undoubtedly a throwback to the time when our ancestors kept a lookout for lions while never straying too far from the relative safety of the trees. If one of the big cats even looked like it was getting hungry, our simian ancestors would dash back to the upper branches of the forest, and cower there until the cat wandered off.

Likewise, when someone dies on either screen or printed page, the ancient fight-or-flight impulse takes over. It says, "Pay attention, dummy! Your life's in danger." And since that reaction is much more primitive than the higher function of literary criticism, you find yourself with senses turned up full in the midst of some fictional universe, adrenaline pumping through your veins. In other words, you have just been dragged bodily into the story.

Since killing one of your characters is such a powerful aid to getting the readers or viewers interested in your plot, obviously you need someone you can afford to kill for a victim. Starfleet policy seems to require senior officers to lead most shore parties (called "away teams" in *Star Trek: The Next Generation*). Therefore, finding someone to kill is not an easy thing to do. On the original *Star Trek*, a typical shore party would often consist of Kirk, Spock, McCoy, and Sulu. Obviously, you can't kill any of these people, not unless it's contract negotiation time. Seventy years later, typical away teams consist of Picard, Ryker, Deanna Troi, and Beverly Crusher. And while Beverly Crusher was exiled to Starfleet Medical for most of one season, no one thought it wise to actually kill her. Even Denise Crosby managed to be resurrected after her untimely death.

Rule One for picaresque (recurrent) series television: Don't kill the stars! Nor is it allowable to kill the guest stars, at least not in the first few minutes of the program. After all, that particular episode is built around the guest star's story, and things are liable to lag a bit if you get rid of the main character at the beginning of the episode.

So, who does that leave to perform the function of cannon fodder? Obviously, the unknown in the red uniform! The incidental character is written into the scene in order that we can quickly write him out again. In effect, he was born to die.

Incidental Character Development

If the incidental character isn't long for this world, you don't want to invest too much time and effort in developing his or her character. For one thing, you don't want the readers or viewers to get too fond of incidental characters. Their deaths are meant to advance the plot, not send the readers into fits of mourning. Also, if you take too much time describing the history and background of incidental characters, you tend to make the plot drag. Remember the rule of writing known as "Maintaining Dynamic Tension," or less technically: "Take out the boring parts."

As I have mentioned many times in this series, I stand in awe of the works of Tom Clancy. Having virtually invented the techno-thriller genre, he has honed it to as fine an instrument as any author has ever produced. Still, even the masters have an off day now and again.

The Clancy book I liked least was *A Clear and Present Danger*, in which our hero, Jack Ryan, fights the Colombian drug lords. In fact, as I write this, the movie was

on network television last night. (Note: Since writing this, I have read *Rainbow Six*. The Colombian drug lords are no longer at the bottom of my list of Tom Clancy books.)

One of the things I found distracting about *A Clear and Present Danger* is its tendency to go into a long background history for just about every character that Clancy introduces. There is the captain of the Coast Guard cutter, for instance. We travel back to the Vietnam War and learn how the captain got his name “King of SAR” (Search and Rescue). We follow Chief Orosco back twenty years, as well as numerous other characters. Now most of these are minor characters, if not actually incidental ones and reader fatigue sets in after awhile. Frankly, these people don’t play a large enough role in the plot of the book that we need to know their entire life story (“I was born at a very early age...”). A few paragraphs of background would have been sufficient to describe these minor characters. Instead, we get page after page of background material on each and every one of them.

There is a technical term for what Clancy is doing while setting up his incidental characters in *A Clear and Present Danger*. It’s called “padding.” Padding occurs when a writer has told his editors that he will be turning in a book of 500 pages, but has in mind a story that might fill up 200 pages, if he’s lucky. As soon as the writer realizes he is running short, he begins to add subplots and character background to fluff up the story to the required length. Sometimes it works and *War and Peace* evolves out of “*How I Spent My Winter in Moscow* by N. Bonaparte.” More often than not, however, this technique merely highlights the fact that you don’t have much to say, but that you are saying it at great length anyway.

I do not wish to give the impression that incidental characterizations should be given short shrift, however. Nothing can be further from my intent. Rather, the backgrounds and characterizations of incidental characters should be gemlike -- short, concise, and memorable. To illustrate this point, I will show my age and use as an example one of the best war movies ever made: *Air Force*, made in 1944.

Air Force is a typical WW II propaganda movie where the Americans are the good guys and the Japanese are the bad guys. The plot follows the crew of a single Boeing B-17 bomber. The bomber is part of a flight of aircraft that has the misfortune of being ferried from California to Hawaii on December 7, 1941. (That fact, at least, is historically accurate. One of the reasons the radar operators on Oahu didn’t get overly excited when they spotted the incoming Japanese air armada was that they were expecting a flight of B-17s.)

Propaganda or no, *Air Force* is an excellently crafted movie. There are two basic reasons for this. The first is that the studio used an actual B-17 mockup for the set (an early model B-17A or B for the aviation enthusiasts among you). There is nothing that grounds a story in reality so much as having the actors sitting around the actual piece of hardware in which the story takes place.

The second thing that makes the movie is that the cast is composed almost entirely of character actors from the studio’s (Warner Brother’s, I believe) large stable of contract players. The crew of the B-17 is composed largely of men who had honed their craft as actors for decades prior to World War II, and who knew how to play their parts in an understated, gritty, and realistic way. We learn about the bomber’s crew on the long flight from California to Hawaii. There is the crew chief who plans to visit his son in the Philippines (you know what happens to the son, of course), the deadheading fighter jock

who hates bombers, the Brooklyn Dodger fan (all WW II movies poke fun at people from Brooklyn). The writers helped draw the incidental characters sharply by giving everyone sparkling dialogue and an identifiable personality. There are no cardboard characters in this movie. Even the Marines on the soon-to-be-overrun Wake Island are carefully drawn gems of performances. They are ready to meet the enemy bravely, but want the bomber crew to ferry their dog off the island so he won't be harmed.

It is this attention to detail among the incidental characters that makes the movie. Nor is this characterization intrusive. The writers have managed to squeeze all of this into two hours while treating us to at least two major battles and their aftermath. One interesting side effect of this craftsmanship, however, is that the nominal heroes of the movie (the B-17's pilots) come across as merely members of the overall crew. The movie is about the plane as a whole and not specifically about any particular member. Whether this was the director's original intent, I have no idea. All I do know is that 60 years after the fact; his efforts have stood the test of time.

You should consider your writing career successful if even one of your books can make the same claim six decades hence.

Attention to Detail

What we have been talking about is essentially paying attention to detail. You need to give sufficient detail for your incidental characters that the readers see them as real people, but not so much detail that they ask, "Why am I learning this, anyway?" So to drive home the point, let us look at another movie that is known for its deft use of incidental characters. I refer to the blockbuster, *Titanic*, the most expensive movie ever made, topping the scales at \$200 million.

That enormous price tag had a lot of people predicting that *Titanic* would be a major flop. On the contrary, *Titanic* was a titanic success. Almost everyone has seen it. If you haven't, as a burgeoning author, you owe it to yourself to see how a story can truly be brought to life by paying careful attention to detail. (I hope I am not giving anything away when I tell you that the ship sinks in the end.)

As numerous television specials about *Titanic* have told us, James Cameron, the director, is a stickler for details about the sinking of the majestic ocean liner in 1912. It is reputed that he added a million dollars to the cost of the movie merely because the computer animators had the propellers turning as the ship went down (when every *Titanic* buff knows that they had stopped by that time). Rather than be inaccurate, he had them completely redo the scene, at a price of \$1 million per minute of screen time.

The technique Cameron used in developing the movie's plot was to make the core a fictional love story between two main characters, but to make everything else as historically accurate as possible. Thus, whenever the two lovers are in the scene, their actions are dreamed up from out of whole cloth. Everything that happens around them, however, is based on the testimony of survivors or on historical photographs.

Titanic is a colossal movie that required a colossal set. Cameron's *Titanic* is fully 90% as large as the original ship. However, the set has only a starboard side and during the dock scene, the passengers loaded from the port side. A lesser director would have filmed the ship sitting backward in its Liverpool berth. Because he was looking for maximum accuracy, James Cameron took a different approach. He had all of the text in

the dock scene (lettering on the ship, buildings, even luggage) painted in mirror image. He then shot the scene and flipped the film over to reverse everything. One effect of this is to make the characters look a little odd compared to their later scenes. For although human beings are laterally bi-symmetric, our subconscious minds can often tell when we are looking at a mirror image. This is one reason why people usually don't like looking at pictures of themselves. They are used to seeing their own images in mirrors, and the true image just doesn't feel right.

The interior sets for *Titanic* were all carefully crafted to agree with historical photographs. The grand staircase and first class salons really looked like that, as did the gymnasium. Even the silverware used in the movie is stamped with the logo of the White Star Line.

What has all of this attention to detail on the set have to do with incidental character development? Nothing, save to give you some idea of the trouble that James Cameron went to in order to make the ship seem real to us. He took equal care when it came to presenting the incidental characters that swirl around the two lovers as they cavort about the decks (although, to be totally accurate, the cavorting took place below decks, mostly in the forward cargo hold).

Most of the incidental characters are also made up to look like their historical counterparts. Captain Smith, Bruce Ismay, and all the other characters are recognizable copies of the originals. Molly Brown looks totally unlike the young Debbie Reynolds of *The Unsinkable Molly Brown*, and much more like the real Molly Brown of Leadville, Colorado.

The scenes aboard *Titanic* are staged to resemble old photographs of the *Titanic's* maiden, and last, voyage and to agree with survivors' accounts of what happened that terrible night. When Leonardo DiCaprio's character climbs over the railing that separates his steerage class deck from the first class deck above, a small boy is playing with a top in the foreground. The scene is based on a photograph taken aboard *Titanic* when it was in the harbor of Cherbourg, France. When Bruce Ismay tells Captain Smith that he wants the ship to set a transatlantic speed record, the woman listening in the background is the one who testified to that fact at the inquiry.

Likewise, when the ship sinks, virtually everything one sees is in accordance with the historic record. There is the baker who rode the ship down while clinging to the stern rail, the minister who prays for the doomed crowd as the decks pitch upward, and the band that played calmly on until the water rose to their position amidships.

The technique used in *Titanic* is one that every author should study and attempt to adapt to his or her own work. By centering the movie on a love story, Cameron personalizes the great tragedy as many previous movies have attempted, but failed, to do. Our concentration on the lovers brings us into the story and the attention to detail with the backdrop and incidental characters allows us to accept these moving patterns of light and dark on the screen as a real ship and real people.

We grieve as we see all of those well-drawn characters floundering about in the rising water, first aboard ship, and later bobbing up and down in the freezing ocean. Because we have seen these people alive and happy, our feeling of loss is heightened when they meet their inevitable fates in the ice cold water of the North Atlantic. By making each and every character on screen an individual, James Cameron convinces us utterly that we, too, are aboard the great dying ship.

The Conservation of Characters

Let us now transition from an epic motion picture to a book with somewhat more modest goals. I refer to my own first novel, *Life Probe* (Del Rey, 1982. Available for Download from Sci Fi - Arizona).

Like most authors, I am inordinately fond of my first novel. That is because it is the work that convinced me that I truly had what it takes to become a professional writer. It also taught me a great deal about writing at book length. Prior to *Life Probe* (which is 92,000 words in length), the longest thing I had written was a 25,000-word novella. By doing a novel, I doubled what I had learned about the craft of writing as a short story writer. However, the most memorable thing I learned was a principle that I have subsequently dubbed “The Law of Conservation of Characters.”

Unlike short stories, where you often introduce no more than half a dozen characters, writing at book length requires that you come up with fifty or more characters to support your plot. Usually you make these characters up as you go along. You will find yourself writing a scene and say to yourself, “Hmmm, I need someone other than the hero and heroine to make this point. Who should I choose?”

When I find a need to introduce a new character, I add them to a separate character list. On this list I put down the character’s name, physical description, and often a brief summary of their history. The summary can be as short as a couple of words, and is never longer than a few paragraphs.

One of the primary uses of a character list is to make sure that each character’s name is sufficiently distinctive that the readers won’t get confused. If you find that you have peppered your book with a few Smiths, Smythes, and Smathers, you may want to consider changing a few names. The same is true for Joe, Jones, Jonas, and Joann. If you want to know how the readers feel when you give a large number of your characters similar names, just think back to the last Japanese *Godzilla* movie you watched. Were you absolutely positive of whom the hero was?

Initially this is all there is to adding characters. As you get fairly far along in the book, however, you often find that you need a new character. My recommendation is that instead of thinking up new names *ad infinitum*, consider whether or not you can reuse an already introduced character instead.

Early in *Life Probe*, I have a scene in which a couple of incidental characters (both espionage agents for their respective governments) meet at lunch and discuss the external effects of the unfolding plot. Up to that moment we had only viewed things from the point of the protagonists and antagonists. One of the characters that I create for this short (and disposable) scene is Murray Danziger, Agent of the latter-day FBI.

Later in the book, I need a character to give the protagonists some vitally important information about the villains, information that they can’t possibly know for themselves. Now I could have invented a character to walk into the scene, deliver the information, and then walk out again. In fact, that was my intention. However, when I pulled up my character list and scanned down the names, I noted the name of Murray Danziger. At that moment I had a flash of insight. I had established his existence some fifty pages earlier. Why not bring him back? The information I needed to impart was of the sort that an espionage agent would know.

The insight that I could recycle this particular character was so great that it allowed me to write two whole chapters in a day or two, rather than mulling things over for the couple of weeks it normally takes me to get the plot where I want it. Also, by reusing the character, I was able to avoid the usual introductory words that come with a new character. Instead of starting an incidental character from scratch, I was able to expand on the characterization of one that already existed. Best of all, when the character reappeared, I left the impression with the readers that it was all a clever plan on my part. In fact, it was just a lucky accident.

The reason why the conservation of characters is so important is that the readers have had time to assimilate the fact that this particular character already exists. Unlike a brand new character, a “used” character has already been planted firmly in their minds. They know he or she actually exists because the incidental character is already an old friend, and has been one for 50-100 pages. All that is needed to establish the character’s verisimilitude is to mention their name and then find a way to remind the readers where they have seen the character before.

Conclusion

So what has this month’s trip to the movies and through my own writing taught us about the use of incidental characters? Hopefully, I have shown you the two extremes at which incidental characters can be handled. Either you can portray them as the unknown actor in the red uniform, the one who enters the transporter room, climbs onto the transporter pad, and then goes to meet his doom with hardly a word to anyone. Or else you can spend the literary equivalent of two hours of screen time in building a richly textured tapestry where every character is a finely drawn portrait of a human being.

Obviously, this latter technique is much more difficult. However, just as obviously, it produces far better results than the “disposable” character method. A writer who attempts to build a richly textured background must be careful not to overdo it, however. From watching the various *The Making of Titanic* specials on television, I understand that James Cameron could have made a 6-7 hour movie had he wanted to. If you lack the discipline to cut out everything but the absolute essentials, you will have the readers squirming before they get halfway through your book. Nor will this “squirm” be the good kind. Rather, it will be the variety that indicates the readers are finding your *magnum opus* hard going.

Make your descriptions of incidental characters distinctive, memorable, and above all, short. Reuse your characters where it makes sense, but don’t do so if it makes your writing strained. Remember that incidental characters are people, too. And in case you have forgotten, people are what fiction is all about!

The End

© 2009 by Michael McCollum, All Rights Reserved

This article is the property of the author and of Sci Fi - Arizona. It may not be sold, or used for any commercial purpose whatsoever, without the written permission of the author.

Sci Fi - Arizona

A Virtual Science Fiction Bookstore and Writer's Workshop

Michael McCollum, Proprietor
WWW.SCIFI-AZ.COM

If you enjoy technologically sophisticated science fiction or have an interest in writing, you will probably find something to interest you at Sci Fi - Arizona. We have short stories and articles on writing— all for free! If you like what you find, we have full length, professionally written science fiction novels in both electronic form and as hard copy books, and at prices lower than you will find in your local bookstore.

Moreover, if you like space art, you can visit our Art Gallery, where we feature the works of Don Dixon, one of the best astronomical and science fiction artists at work today. Don is the Art Director of the Griffith Observatory. Pick up one or more of his spacescapes for computer wallpaper, or order a high quality print direct from the artist.

We have book length versions of both Writers' Workshop series, "The Art of Writing, Volumes I and II" and "The Art of Science Fiction, Volumes I and II" in both electronic and hard copy formats.

So if you are looking for a fondly remembered novel, or facing six hours strapped into an airplane seat with nothing to read, check out our offerings. We think you will like what you find.

NOVELS

1. Life Probe - ^{US}\$5.00

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}\$5.00

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\$5.00

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\$5.00

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\$5.00

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\$5.00

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\$5.00

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.

13. The Art of Writing, Volume II - US\$10.00

This collection covers the Art of Writing articles published during 1998. The book is 62,000 words in length and builds on the foundation of knowledge provided by Volume I of this popular series.

14. The Art of Science Fiction, Volume I - US\$10.00

Have you missed any of the articles in the Art of Science Fiction Series? No problem. The first sixteen articles (October, 1996-December, 1997) have been collected into a book-length work of more than 70,000 words. Learn about science fiction techniques and technologies, including starships, time machines, and rocket propulsion. Tour the Solar System and learn astronomy from the science fiction writer's viewpoint. We don't care where the stars appear in the terrestrial sky. We want to know their true positions in space. If you are planning to write an interstellar romance, brushing up on your astronomy may be just what you need.

15. The Art of Science Fiction, Volume II - US\$10.00

This collection covers the *Art of Science Fiction* articles published during 1998. The book is 67,000 words in length and builds on the foundation of knowledge provided by Volume I of this popular series.

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.