



Writing about Race, Part II
The Writer's Dilemma
By
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I was born in 1946, or as I like to tell people, "On the leading edge of the post-war baby boom, with attitude to prove it." My father returned from the Pacific at war's end in 1945 and was stationed in San Antonio, Texas, where he met my mother on a blind date. When asked to specify what sort of a soldier she liked, she replied, "I like them tall." That he was. My father was 6 feet 5 inches tall, and so am I. Exactly what my mother was doing in San Antonio at the time (she was a native of Massillon, Ohio), I am not quite sure. I would ask her, but then she would get all weepy-eyed over my father, who died nearly a decade ago, and I have no wish to set her off again.

Having come of age in the 1960s, I was an eyewitness via television to the turmoil that certain people in the mainstream press and Hollywood look back on with such nostalgia. Personally, I think the wrong people are being celebrated, but that is the subject of a different article.

As we discussed in the last article in this series, I was a 1963 convert to the cause of civil rights. Essentially, my attitudes on the subject were solidified during June and July of that year, which I spent at a National Science Foundation program for high school students where I roomed with a passel of Eastern liberals. Before that experience, I had been ambivalent to the subject of civil rights for minorities. Afterwards, I was a committed reformer.

Not that I took part in any marches down south in that era. In those days, I could not even afford the bus fare to Selma or Montgomery, let alone the cost of food once I got there. However, I did what I could, which consisted primarily of arguing about civil rights with my grandmother. She was born in 1900, called black people "Negroes," and was considerably less ardent on the subject than I was. In fact, when she was visiting, the two of us made dinnertime at our house something to be avoided. She could not understand my enthusiasm for "Negroes" being given the same rights as "regular people." Her position was that equality was fine as an ideal, but that it should not be forced on members of the majority population who were uncomfortable with it.

These battles-royal took place in 1965, and though I am still a dozen years shy of my grandmother's age at that time, I believe that I am coming to understand her point of view. No, I do not think that the white majority population should be able to avoid the black minority population if they wish. What I understand is that we are all products of our formative years and that our attitudes reflect whatever truths we adopted as young adults. Nor is it a matter that we fail to "grow" in our attitudes as we get older. Rather, it is the fact that "truth" is not malleable. Absent some significant emotional event in our

lives, that which we believed to be true in our formative years, we believe to be true throughout our lives.

For instance, I grew up in an era when there was institutional racism throughout the nation. Nor was this racism limited to the South. There was racism in the North as well, just not as blatant. It was a time when Dr. Martin Luther King spoke of a person being judged by "the content of their character and not the color of their skins." It was a time when policemen dressed in riot gear used cattle prods on peaceful American citizens (not to be confused with the Elian Gonzales raid), and when Lester Maddox became the governor of a southern state by waving an ax handle as the political symbol of his campaign.

On the other side were people I considered true heroes. There were the three students who were murdered and whose bodies were dumped in a Mississippi bog. There were liberal crusaders like Hubert Humphrey, who believed that minorities should not be discriminated against, and that political rights reside in individuals rather than groups. To Humphrey, there was no such thing as the "rights of black people." There were only "the rights of black *persons*."

As a writer who had his attitudes about race largely formed in the turbulent 1960s, I find that I am somewhat out of step with modern attitudes. On the one hand, there are those who would take us back to a time when the color of a man's skin determined how far he could go in life. Luckily, these out-and-out bigots have largely been vanquished. There is another group, however, who are very much in the ascendancy. They believe that government should parcel out its largesse based on a person's membership in a particular group, an idea that was anathema to Hubert Humphrey. They see nothing wrong with penalizing those who did not sin in order to reward those who were not victims. They speak of paying reparations for slavery, even though there is not a single ex-slave or ex-slaveholder left alive today.

As a 1960s liberal on the subject of civil rights, I am as uncomfortable with the one set of beliefs as I am with the other. For it appears to me there is a new tyranny loose in the land, a movement that would silence all who hold an opposing viewpoint. That movement goes by the name of "political correctness." The thought police decree that we are all free to speak our minds, so long as what we say is not "hateful" or "insensitive" or disruptive of our "sense of community."

As writers, we should all be very concerned about this trend. For what it says is that there are some words too taboo to be uttered, some thoughts too out of the mainstream to be placed on paper. Of course, one of the most explosive of these "politically correct" subjects is race, and enough people have been publicly ruined for a slip of the tongue that it is a brave soul who will wander into that thicket without some trepidation.

The problem, of course, is that writers should be free to write whatever they wish without fear of the thought police. We should rush to celebrate the differences among human beings, not ignore them lest some self-appointed censor demand that our books be removed from the shelves. In a free society, an Orthodox Jew advice-giver should be free to express her opinion on television and not have an organized special interest group mount a campaign to scare off her advertisers. To a writer, there can be no words that are not spoken, nor thoughts that are not explored. We must be free to follow where our muses lead.

This situation leads to a dilemma for writers. Do we say what we think and face the inevitable opprobrium of those who would force our thoughts into an ideological straitjacket, or do we pull our punches and avoid the controversy? Obviously, you do not want to write a paean to David Duke, the Louisiana racist, unless, of course, that is your intent. Nor do you want to avoid exploring the complexity of your character's experience with being black merely because some hyperventilating guardian of the public discourse might be offended. So, how do you defend your right to write about race without unintentionally setting off the fireworks of political correctness?

Luckily, there are techniques to resolve our dilemma, and that is the subject of this month's article.

The Nature of Racism

It is in the nature of human beings to be suspicious of strangers, or of anyone who looks or dresses differently, or speaks a different language. This tendency is a result of evolution. It comes from the regrettable fact that too often in the history of humankind, those who trusted strangers did not live to pass their genes on to their offspring.

This natural suspicion of those who originate over the next hill or in the next valley is what drives the sin of racism, which is present in all cultures and in every era. In Canada, I am told; Newfoundlanders are the butt of malicious jokes, even though to my knowledge, they are of the same stock as the majority of Canadians. "On television tonight, it was announced that the world will end at midnight — that's 12:30, Newfoundland time." (If this is merely a scurrilous story, I would appreciate some Canadians disabusing me of this idea.)

In Japan, racism is rampant, and I hope I have not offended my Japanese readers too much by saying so. The Japanese are one of the most homogenous cultures on Earth, and they work hard at keeping it that way. They have a proverb: "If a nail sticks up, hammer it down." This means that individualism is not as prized as it is in the west, and that they can give you a hard time if you are different. Even foreign-born Japanese have problems assimilating into Japanese culture, let alone non-Japanese people.

I have been to Japan several times, and both like and respect the people I have worked with. Like many cultures, however, the Japanese consider themselves the chosen ones, and they have an air of cultural superiority about them. This is a healthy attitude for anyone, and nothing for an American to criticize. After all, we are probably the biggest culture snobs on the planet. However, it can also cause problems. Racially, Japanese are descended from the Koreans, but it is not considered polite to say so.

I have also noted on my various visits an especially interesting attitude among the Japanese toward Americans. On the one hand, the Japanese word for westerners is *gijene*, which loosely translates as "barbarian." On the other hand, we defeated Japan in the Second World War and occupied it afterward, which gives Americans an artificially high status in Japanese eyes. However, this status applies only to white Americans. Black Americans are subconsciously viewed as a lesser group, an attitude that has gotten more than one Japanese businessman or politician in trouble here in the U.S. Nor are the Japanese being malicious in this attitude. They merely grew up in a different culture, one that treasures the values of Japanese homogeneity, and which lacks our perspective gained from 40 years of civil rights marches. (And now that I have offended the whole

Land of the Rising Sun, may this humble *gijene* beg your forgiveness so that we can continue?)

In the United States, racism has waxed and waned over the years due to a couple of historical developments. Mostly, of course, it has waxed. Prejudice against members of another group has usually been driven by a perceived economic or physical threat. My group, for instance, came to the United States in large numbers because of the Irish Potato Famine. In the years following 1845, forty percent of the population of Ireland either emigrated or died of the famine, reducing a population of 8 million to less than 5 million. Those emigrants who came to the United States (which was most of them) found themselves unwelcome because they were taking jobs away from the “real Americans” of the time. It was not unusual to see a sign in the window of a shop stating, “Help Wanted — No Irish Need Apply.”

Then there was the dispute between the European immigrants and the pre-existing Native American (Indian) cultures. These wars, which went on for 300 years, were less about race than they were about culture. The native cultures of North America were largely hunter-gatherers, with some digging-stick agriculture to leaven the mix. These were supplanted by a much larger, agricultural-industrial culture that was utterly alien to their nomadic way of life. Not surprisingly, the two ways of living frequently clashed with one another.

In my local newspaper, *The Phoenix Gazette*, they used to run a small feature titled, “The News 75 Years Ago.” One thing I discovered shortly after I began reading this feature, the 19th century settlers of the Salt River Valley were not very fond of Indians. In fact, I cannot remember a single sympathetic story about the Apaches. The reason for this animus was simple enough. As late as the mid-1880s, Apache war parties raided down the Salt River into what is now the Phoenix Metropolitan Area, killing people and burning homes. No wonder the settlers were biased against them. One thing we tend to forget in our self-centeredness is that the Apaches were not too fond of the white settlers, either. Frankly, it is hard to fault either side for their attitude, considering the body count.

These animosities have largely died away as the perceived threats have receded. I know of no widespread anti-Irish bias in the United States today. Anti-Indian sentiment has largely given way to a maudlin sentimentality that does them little good. Indeed, until the advent of Indian gaming on the reservations, I was an advocate of doing away with reservations altogether. The ills of government dependency were killing off a once-proud people, driving them to alcoholism and despair. Since they have gone into the business of relieving the white suckers of their cash, however, things appear to be looking up.

Which brings us to the United States' most serious problem with racism, the long history of bias against those who are the descendents of slaves brought to our shores between the years 1650 and 1860. It is this problem that has plagued us for all of my life, and for the lives of my parents and grandparents. While the problem of racism against blacks has a plethora of historical roots, the problem's longevity stems from an historical oddity. Slavery in America, unlike the institution through most of history, was based on race.

People have kept slaves since the beginning of time. Slavery may even be making a comeback, at least in terms of what was once called “white slavery.” In fact,

slavery was widespread until the dawn of the industrial age made it uneconomical. As we have discussed before in this series, buying a field hand in the mid-nineteenth century cost about the same as a harvester, and the upkeep was much higher.

Most slaveholding societies in history did their dirty deed without regard to the race of the enslaved. The Romans, for instance, took slaves from all over their Empire, even from Britain. This meant that once the slaves were freed, it did not take them too many generations until they disappeared into the general population.

In the United States, almost all of the slaves imported before the Civil War came from Africa, and despite being free for 140 years, black people are not able to blend into the majority Caucasian population the way an ex-Roman slave could. Black people cannot change the color of their skins (nor should they want to). However, since they remained an identifiable group, they were easy targets for the frustrations left by the Civil War, and the carpetbaggers of Reconstruction.

Because of the prejudicial attitudes of the defeated white Southerners, there was a pervasive attitude throughout the 19th century and well into the 20th century that blacks were inferior. This attitude is starkly illustrated by a movie that you can still see on the late show or the cable channels dedicated to nostalgia.

Charlie Chan and Stepin Fetchit

One of my favorite late-night movie characters is Charlie Chan, the wily Chinese detective of the 1930s and 1940s. In keeping with the attitudes of the day, Charlie Chan was played by a Caucasian — first Walter Oland, until his death in 1938, and then Sidney Toler. He was portrayed as a kindly police inspector who was courteous to everyone, even the murderer, who he always found out in the final reel. Everyone, that is, with one exception.

I have a very strong memory of a Charlie Chan movie that has Stepin Fetchit in its supporting cast. Stepin Fetchit was a black comedian whose portrayals are today considered to be extremely offensive to black people. However, to the less sophisticated audiences of the 1930s, his slow moving, easily frightened, stupid demeanor was considered uproariously funny. I remember Charlie Chan acting the kindly Oriental detective right up until Stepin Fetchit comes onto the scene. At that instant, Sidney Toler becomes stern and disapproving. It is as though the “Chinese” detective is discriminating against the stupid, black servant, and as such, is a perfect reflection of general attitudes of the day.

The only problem with my memory is that it is wrong. In researching this article, I discovered that Stepin Fetchit never appeared in any Charlie Chan movies. Rather, the actor I saw was Mantan Moreland, who played Charlie Chan's wide-eyed “colored” driver, Birmingham Brown, in six of the later movies made by Monogram Pictures. Moreland's character is every bit as stereotypical and insulting as Fetchit's, and the hostility that “Chan” shows him is real. I just got my black “comedians” mixed up.

The fact that you no longer see much of Stepin Fetchit on the late show is an indication of just how far we have come in the last 60 years or so. From the institutionalized, generalized racism of the 1930s, we have developed a society where race is a non-issue, where the color of a person's skin is no more important than the color

of their hair, and where all men and women are judged on the content of their character and the degree of their ability.

Of course, if you believe that, you probably believed the President's latest pronouncement on whatever subject he was speaking this morning [Writer's note: This article was originally written in 2000. The President referred to was the one who "didn't have sexual relations with that woman, Miss Lewinsky."] In truth, we are approaching the 1960s ideal of a colorblind society, but from a direction that ought to appall any true follower of Martin Luther King.

A Surprising Approach to a Colorblind Society

Having worked in large corporations all my life, I recently became aware of a trend that I find both odd and a bit disturbing. Having been indoctrinated yearly in "diversity," "affirmative action," and "equal opportunity," corporate denizens such as myself have long been schooled in the need for tolerance. This is good. If you would like the best historical example of the price a society pays for racial prejudice, consider the fact that the people who built the atom bomb for the United States included a large number of German Jews who fled Nazism. Just think of how much better Adolf Hitler's Third Reich might have fared had these scientists been working for him rather than us.

However, all of this diversity training in corporations and academia appears to have sparked a reaction that can best be described as the Law of Unintended Consequences in action. Having seen people fired or demoted over an innocent slip of the tongue, or for exhibiting an attitude not quite as progressive as the corporate fathers would like, many people have adopted a policy of color blindness. Because they are not sure what words are currently in the politically correct lexicon, because they are afraid of making a faux pas if they open their mouths and say the wrong thing, they have adopted as a working thesis the idea that *black people do not exist*.

Obviously, they do not really believe this. After all, they interact with African-Americans all the time. However, because people do not know how they are supposed to act when dealing with a person of another race, they freeze up, and effectively make that person into a non-entity. I first became aware of this syndrome about ten years ago while my boss's secretary and I were discussing the precise shade of her husband's skin tones.

As many of you who have read this series for a long time know, I tried to make money by selling personalized novels on the INTERNET. It seemed a good idea at the time, although it has not been as successful as I hoped. For a fee of \$50.00, I would insert the names of the purchaser and any member of the opposite sex they chose into a novel. I would then print and bind the book and give it to the purchaser, who in turn usually gave it to someone as a gift. One of the first people to purchase one of my personalized novels was my boss's secretary, who is an African-American.

Since part of the service involved changing the character descriptions to better match the customer, I needed to find out how she wanted her husband described. Hair and eyes were easy — black and brown — but, of course, skin color is another defining characteristic. Therefore, I asked her to describe her husband's skin tone to me so that I could add it to the description.

What followed was a two-minute dissertation on the complexities of skin color as evaluated by African-Americans. Frankly, I had no idea the subject was so involved.

After listening carefully and not understanding most of what she told me, I pointed to the picture of her two little boys on her desk and asked, "Is that the color?" She agreed and her husband became the color of "rich coffee" in the book.

Nor did I stop there. I turned three whole planets black for her as well. It turns out that this is extremely easy to do. If you search out all the occurrences of the words "hair" and "eyes," you find all of the character descriptions and merely insert an occasional reference to skin color. In fact, my "black" science fiction novels became quite popular once my boss's secretary started showing her book to her friends. I sold several more.

The point of this story is not my diversity-on-demand printing capability. Rather, it involves an incident while we were having our discussion. About midway through the crash course in African-American skin color, my boss walked out of his office (this was six bosses ago). I thought he was going to have a heart attack. His eyes got big, he sucked in a lungful of air, and he went white as a sheet. There we were, two of his subordinates, having a taboo discussion right outside his door!

The second incident occurred when I was talking with two engineers from another aerospace company. We were discussing e-business, specifically putting corporate web sites on the INTERNET. I recounted some of the odd constraints one has to worry about when going on the web — things a veteran Information Systems person related to me. I explained that even though we had taken everyone's photograph with the thought that we would put names, pictures, and photographs on our web site, we were not going to do it after all.

"Why not?" one of the engineers asked.

"Two reasons. The first is that if we put up our personnel list, what we are basically doing is publishing a catalog for head hunters (people who recruit professionals for other companies)—"

The second reason for not putting our names and photographs online involved the photographs. My company is one of the leaders in Equal Opportunity Employment. We are quite proud of our record. However, if we were to put up a series of photographs and too many of them turned out to be Caucasian, we might attract the attention of certain "civil rights" organizations who have lately threatening boycotts unless companies hire "consultants" off the organization's list.

I began explaining this second reason when the third engineer in our group almost had a heart attack. Unexpectedly, a technical discussion had drifted into the subject of race, which to him was off limits. Puzzled, I explained that I was not making a value judgment, merely pointing out one of the constraints under which we must work. He would still hear nothing of it.

So why am I relating these stories to a group of writers, most of who do not have to deal with the politics of corporate life? Because we do not have the luxury of ignoring the existence of minorities in our writing. Our characters' race is part of who they are and often the key to what motivates them. For example, how does one write the life story of Malcolm X without mentioning his race, or its effect on his motivations?

There is another reason we should not ignore our characters' race. By refusing to acknowledge that black people (or any other minority) exist, we are, in effect, refusing to acknowledge their humanity. The underlying assumption of avoiding the subject of race is that there is something wrong with being black. It is like the crazy aunt we keep

locked in the room in the attic. It would be impolite to call attention to the fact that some of our acquaintances have different skin color than the rest of us.

If you find that to be a wild statement, consider how many times you have heard Gentiles avoid acknowledging the religion of someone who is Jewish. To all too many Christians over a certain age, "You dirty Jew!" was always a deadly insult, and therefore, it is something they do not call people.

What these people do not understand is that Jews do not consider being called "Jew" to be pejorative. It is, in fact, the name they call themselves. I learned this one evening in Russian Class, when I was explaining to a new student that our teacher, Ella (Eleanora Borisovna Krasnova), was not a Russian, but rather a Ukrainian. Ella heard me and yelled out, "I am not a Ukrainian. I am a Ukrainian Jew!" Now the difference is a mystery to me, but she seemed to think it important. Nor did she consider it an insult to be called a Jew. In fact, she is quite proud of it.

That is the point we writers must keep firmly in mind when we venture into the thicket of racial writing. Most members of minorities are proud of who they are. Black really is beautiful! So are Red, Yellow, Brown, and White. Just as Greek-Americans are proud to be Hellenes, and Italian-Americans are proud to be the descendants of Roman Emperors, African-Americans are justifiably proud of their triumphs over adversity. To never acknowledge their identity is a racism more subtle and cruel than burning a cross on their lawn.

That, at least, is my belief. Perhaps that is merely my weird 1960s-civil-rights-liberal upbringing showing through.

Of course, when you decide that you will indeed write about minorities (especially black people), you face the problem of what to call them. Therein lies a problem as complex as describing skin color from an African-American point of view.

A Rose, By Any Other Name, Could Get You in Serious Trouble

One of the things that have fascinated me over the previous few decades has been the progression of names for people of African descent. [A warning: Since this series is intended to be a comprehensive study of the Art of Writing, we will be using a few words that are no longer considered polite, if they ever were. The intent is strictly clinical (like a doctor describing sex organs) and if a certain word beginning with "N" offends you excessively, you may wish to jump to the next section.]

As discussed previously in the context of Gentiles and Jews, there seems to be a general agreement that certain names for minorities are, in fact, pejorative; and that like a proper young lady of the Victorian Age, there are just some words that are not to be used in polite company.

Let us review these words, their history and derivation, and the generally racist assumptions that cause them to become obsolete and need changing every few years. We begin with what may be the most explosive word in the lexicon of American English (especially now that the F-word is used for punctuation in movie dialogue). I refer, of course, to two syllables that, when used by a police officer, serves as the basis for excusing a double homicide by a black sports figure/pitchman. Can anyone think of what word I am talking about? Of course, you can.

Nigger

About this particular racial slur, the dictionary states the following:

Main Entry: **nig-ger**

Pronunciation: 'ni-g&r

Function: *noun*

Etymology: alteration of earlier *neger*, from Middle French *negre*, from Spanish or Portuguese *negro*, from *negro* black, from Latin *niger*

Date: 1700

1 *usually offensive, see usage paragraph below:* a black person

2 *usually offensive, see usage paragraph below :* a member of any dark-skinned race

3: a member of a socially disadvantaged class of persons <it's time for somebody to lead all of America's *niggers*... all the people who feel left out of the political process -- Ron Dellums>

Usage *Nigger* in senses 1 and 2 can be found in the works of such writers of the past as Joseph Conrad, Mark Twain, and Charles Dickens, but it now ranks as perhaps the most offensive and inflammatory racial slur in English. Its use by and among blacks is not always intended or taken as offensive, but, except in sense 3, it is otherwise a word expressive of racial hatred and bigotry.

The use of the word “nigger” was quite common in the 19th century, and was used with abandon well into the 20th. I do not think it has ever been considered polite, and those who wished to avoid offense, used the more formal, “Negro.”

Needless to say, it is a word to be avoided in writing unless you are writing authentic dialogue of the period, or otherwise going for a specific emotional impact. Mark Twain's use of the word in *Huckleberry Finn* is what triggers liberal fascists' efforts to ban the book from school libraries. In truth, the escaped slave, Jim, is the real hero of the story and Twain used the word to lampoon the know-nothings of his day. The modern attempts at censorship only prove that the know-nothings remain ever with us.

A colleague of mine is the science fiction writer Harry Turtledove, who is the current reigning master of the alternate history genre. In his best book, *Guns of the South*, Turtledove starts his plot in 1864. General Robert E. Lee is writing a letter to Jefferson Davis bemoaning the state of his army and his chances for victory, when a disgruntled Afrikaner time traveler shows up and starts handing out AK47 assault rifles in 100,000 unit lots. The course of the war takes a dramatic turn for the better (from the South's viewpoint) after the Army of Northern Virginia is fully equipped with machine guns.

One of the most impressive things about Turtledove's book is his careful historical detail. Even the characters are real people (including the heroine, who is masquerading as a Confederate soldier while actually plying her real profession among the troops). But the thing that impressed me most as a fellow writer, is the fact that

Turtledove succeeds in using the word “nigger” about a thousand times in the book, and all in appropriate ways. As far as I know, no outcry has resulted.

Negro or Colored Person

The anthropologically correct term for persons of African descent is Negroid, or in more common language, Negro. This was always considered the polite formal word of description, and was everything that other word was not. A less formal, but equally polite way to describe African descendents was *colored person*.

So how did these terms fall out of use in the common language?

Actually, they have not fallen totally into disuse. The oldest and one of the largest black organizations in the US is the NAACP — The National Association for the Advancement of Colored Persons. And we have all heard the appeal of the United Negro College Fund (“A mind is a terrible thing to waste.”), although I cannot remember hearing it lately. However, sometime in the late 1960s or early 1970s, those in the business of civil rights decided that these were not the proper terms that should be used for describing their constituents.

Perhaps we can lay the blame at the feet of President Lyndon Johnson, who did more for civil rights than any other president, but who never seemed able to pronounce the word, “Negro.” It always came out “niggra,” which of course, reminds people of that other word. Whatever the cause, nowadays if you use either term, people will look at you as though you are a little quaint.

Black

As you can tell from this article, I have settled on the term “black” to describe this particular minority. It took me awhile to get used to it. For some reason, I thought “black” was terribly wrong when it first came into use. After all, these people are not black in color (any more than I am white). They are dark brown, as I am a light, splotchy brown. Still, it seems the best compromise today. It is short and unobtrusive, which is important in a word that you will be using frequently in your writing.

Of course, the aforementioned time-traveling Afrikaner managed to stuff a lot of disdain into that monosyllable in Harry Turtledove's novel.

People of Color

This is my personal favorite euphemism for black people, and it is not to be confused with Colored People, which is mildly pejorative these days. I do not know who thinks these things up, but I think the Politically Correct Police lost a wheel off their wagon on this one.

African-American

The current accepted term is African-American. This has the advantage of being dignified, but it also seems to have a subtext that somehow these people are not real

“Americans.” Maybe it is just me, but I feel like Ken Hamblin, the Black Avenger of right-wing radio, who says, “African-American — pick one.”

The term also has a disadvantage for writers. It is long and hyphenated, and readers have a tendency to stop and look at it for a few seconds every time they encounter it in their reading. This does not help keeping them in the entranced state into which we place them when they are absorbed in our work.

Recently, a friend asked me to read his book and comment on its quality. (I lose a lot of friends this way.) In his book, he adhered religiously to the accepted usages of the day. Whenever he encountered a black person, he referred to them as an African-American. Another character was a Korean-American. Frankly, the whole thing drove me nuts. There is such a thing as hewing too slavishly to the fashions of the day, especially if you are writing a novel set in the future.

We could go on for several thousand words, delving into the dichotomy between Indian and Native American, Mexican/Hispanic, and Chinese/Oriental/Asian-American. However, I suspect that you are getting as tired of this as I am. Therefore, let us transition from what it is we writers do wrong, to how it is that we can do it correctly.

How to do it right!

We have now spent 6000 words teaching you what not to do, or stressing the things you should avoid. What is it that a writer *should* do when writing about race?

Simply stated, you should be honest with yourself and your reader. If several of your characters are members of a racial minority, then treat those characters first as individuals, and second as members of their race. Do not ignore their genetic and cultural heritage, but do not fixate on them either. Even if one of your characters is George Armstrong Custer and the other is Chief Sitting Bull, do not make their conflict a racial thing. They had valid reasons to hate one another, and those reasons dealt only peripherally with the fact that one was red and the other white. In fact, had one group of Caucasians treated another group the way the European settlers treated the Indians, pretty much the same thing would have happened.

If you are sufficiently confused at this point that you have decided to take the pseudo-colorblind approach, take heart. For there exists a training video for authors on the subject of writing about race.

It is not really a training video, of course. It is a movie ... about basketball.

I refer to a small gem of a 1994 sports movie starring Kevin Bacon and directed by Paul Michael Glaser (of *Starsky and Hutch* fame), titled *The Air Up There*. Even though I am not a basketball fan, I have seen it a dozen times now and each time I am impressed by how deftly the screenwriter and director handled the subject of race.

The plot involves an assistant-coach for a fictional college where basketball is the big sport. Kevin Bacon plays an ex-star who missed the NBA when he blew out his knee his senior year in college. The head coach of the college is about to retire, and it looks as though Bacon's character will not get the job. Depressed, and inebriated from too much drowning his sorrows in drink, Bacon attends a banquet where he sees a film detailing the work of the Catholic missionaries in Winabe (Win-ah-bee), Kenya. While the narrator drones on about the school, in the background he sees a seven-foot tall youth (played by

Charles Gitonga Maina) shooting hoops. In his drunken state, he hatches a plan to recruit the African kid for the college team, and thereby show his worthiness to become head coach.

The usual problems confront Bacon and he runs off to Africa without the head coach's permission. It is once he arrives in Kenya that this light story takes a twist. Unlike the typical *Tarzan* movie, the Kenyans are portrayed as individuals with idiosyncrasies, and suddenly, the story is no longer about the white basketball coach. The Kenyans become the focus and Bacon is relegated to the role of supporting player.

For the Winabe people, we discover, have troubles of their own. The Winabe are either the Watusi people of *King Solomon's Mine*, or else close relatives. They are cattle ranchers in conflict with the nearby community of Mingori, which is a copper mining town. The big man in Mingori (in every sense of the word) is out to steal their land, which has copper under it. Because they keep to the old ways, the Winabe are heaped with scorn by the other Kenyans, who tell jokes about them. "Why do the crows fly upside down over Winabe? Because the place isn't worth shitting on."

By treating the Kenyans honestly and without resorting to stereotypes, Glaser transforms these Africans into sympathetic individuals, with each characterization drawn carefully to establish the individual qualities of the person involved. The head of Mingori mining is affable and evil; the chief of the Winabe is burdened by his troubles and opposed to his son running off to America to play basketball. The seven-foot kid is likeable, and has a better outlook on life than does Bacon's character. Besides Bacon, there are only two Caucasians in the cast through much of the movie. They are the sympathetic Catholic Priest (Sean McCann), and the acerbic-tongued nun (Yolanda Vasquez), who instantly takes a dislike to the visiting American "sports-pimp."

Since it is a basketball movie, you know that the conflict is going to come down to a single, climactic basketball game. And, of course, one of the key Winabe players will injure himself in training, requiring the Kevin Bacon character to join the game on the Winabe side. The only problem is that only Winabe tribesmen may play for their team, so to get into the game, Bacon must undergo an adoption ritual that requires him to undergo a feat of endurance, and then an incision from a very sharp knife.

As is required in fiction, in the act of solving the Winabe tribe's problem, Bacon also solves his own. During his ascent up the side of a sheer cliff in a thunderstorm to prove his worth for adoption, he suddenly realizes that there are things more important than his self-centered striving to be head coach. At the end, the Winabe go on to win the game — by a single basket, as is required in such movies — and through their own efforts.

It is not a great piece of cinematic art, but *The Air Up There* handles the problem of interracial writing with surprising aplomb. If you find yourself with a plot that requires you to explore the subject of race, you cannot go far wrong watching this movie and emulating its attitude. Human beings are human beings ... period.

Conclusion

So how does a writer handle the ticklish matter of race? By treating it honestly, and as one aspect of each character's heritage, but by no means the only aspect. Variations in race and culture are what make being human interesting, and if there is

something all of us could use more of in our writing, it is to be interesting. We should celebrate our differences by treating them forthrightly. Never let yourself fall into writing stereotypes. Nor should you allow yourself to be cowed by whatever self-serving group claims the mantle of guardianship of the public morals. Above all, never let anyone tell you there are words that are off limits, or thoughts that you cannot express. That way leads to censorship and totalitarianism, and it matters little whether the dictator is one of the right or the left. Somehow, ideological differences between totalitarians become obscured by the similarity of their methods.

Freedom of speech means the freedom to say things that do not fit into today's orthodoxy. Use it, or lose it.

The End

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2. Procyon's Promise - ^{US}\$7.50

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\$6.00

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\$7.50

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\$7.50

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\$7.50

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\$7.50

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\$7.50

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 — \$7.50

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 — \$7.50

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. Gibraltar Stars – First Time in Print — ^{US}\$7.50

The great debate is over. The human race has rejected the idea of pulling back from the stars and hiding on Earth in the hope the Broa will overlook us for a few more generations. Instead, the World Parliament, by a vote of 60-40, has decided to throw the dice and go for a win. Parliament Hall resounds with brave words as members declare victory inevitable.

With the balance of forces a million to one against *Homo sapiens Terra*, those who must turn patriotic speeches into hard-won reality have their work cut out for them. They must expand humanity's foothold in Broan space while contending with a supply line that is 7000 light-years long.

If the sheer magnitude of the task isn't enough, Mark and Lisa Rykand discover they are in a race against two very different antagonists. The Broa are beginning to wonder at the strange two-legged interlopers in their domain; while back on Earth, those who lost the great debate are eager to try again.

Whoever wins the race will determine the future of the human species... or, indeed, whether it has one.

12. Gridlock and Other Stories - US\$6.00

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

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

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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.

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16. 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.

17. 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.