

MEMBER PROFILE

J. Brian Clarke: Alberta Speculator

J. Brian Clarke emigrated to Canada from Birmingham, England, in 1952, settled in Calgary, and joined a local firm of mechanical consulting engineers. He married a Calgary girl, Marguerite, raised a family of three, and still has not the slightest desire to live anywhere except in the foothills city.

An avid science fiction reader since his childhood (especially *Analog Science Fiction / Science Fact* and its predecessor, *Astounding Science Fiction*), Brian became interested in writing, started by firing off short stories in all directions (without success, to his extreme chagrin), and finally hit the jackpot when John W. Campbell, Jr., published "Artifact" as the cover story in the June 1969 issue of *Analog*.

But long before "Artifact," Brian would probably have abandoned his literary ambitions if it was not for Campbell's gentle encouragement. If that great editor thought there was even a smidgeon of worth in a submission that crossed his desk, he would respond with a personal rejection letter. As subsequent submissions improved (presuming they did, of course), the letters became longer and more encouraging — until finally they were replaced by a cheque.

It was so simple in those days. No contract, no hassles, just the money!

After a second sale to Campbell, and one to the late and much lamented *Galaxy* magazine, the markets seemed to dry up for a while until Stanley Schmidt took over *Analog's* editorial chair.

Then, in rapid succession starting in February 1984, the "Expediter" series of stories appeared — nine of them, including four which were cover stories, and one ("Flaw on Serendip") which was the first runner-up for the 1990 Aurora Award for Best Short Form in English. More recently, Stan published the first two of Brian's new Alphanauts series.

"Testament of Geoffrey," part of the Expediter series, was published in the Moscow publication *Inventor and Innovator*. So far, the writer has not seen a single ruble, although he has a copy of the magazine. Seeing one's name in Russian is a strange experience.

A Spanish editor bought "The Return of the Alphanauts," paid for it, but never published it. Apparently his publisher folded when one of the partners absconded with the company funds (according to a long and slightly hysterical letter from said editor).

"Earthgate" was the lead story in Donald A. Wolheim's 1986 *Annual World's Best SF*, and in March 1990 Brian's novel *The Expediter* was published by DAW Books. Because that novel was cobbled together from six of the *Analog* stories, Brian has never been entirely satisfied with the result. If time and circumstances allow, he intends to go back to square one and rewrite the whole thing as a seamless work.

Currently Brian has three novels looking for a publisher. Two of them (*Waxman's Daughter* and *Waxman's Brothers*) are set in the same universe as "Artifact," Brian's first published story. The third, *Logjam*, is SF with a semi-religious theme.

Brian is a Fellow of the British Interplanetary Society, a long-time member and a past president of the Calgary Centre of the Royal Astronomical Society of Canada, and a member of the Editorial Advisory Board of *On Spec: The Canadian Magazine of Speculative Writing*. In the latter capacity he reads submissions by up-and-coming Canadian writers (plus one or two who have already arrived), and tries hard not to remind himself of the depressing fact that many of these talented people are the competition.

If there is anything more satisfying than the creative act of writing itself, for J. Brian Clarke it has been the opportunity to read and discuss his stories at SF conventions and several Calgary high schools. Despite their too-often bad press, the young people of this country are great! *

STATE OF THE ART

Breaking the Rules by Andrew Weiner

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Orson Scott Card recently expanded his story "Lost Boys" (F&SF, Oct. 1989) into a novel (HarperCollins, 1992). In doing so, Card changed the narrative from first-person, ostensibly about his own life and family, to third-person, about some clearly fictitious characters. Card was heavily criticized for his choice of narrative voice in the short version, but here Andrew Weiner defends that decision.

In the October 1989 issue of *Short Form*, Pat Murphy takes Orson Scott Card to task over his short story "Lost Boys," calling it, among other things, "fundamentally flawed, rotten at the heart ... a heart-breaking cheat."

In essence, Murphy accuses Card of breaking all the rules: the rules, that is, of properly decorous fiction.

Similar thoughts ran through my own mind as I first read "Lost Boys." What is Card *doing* here? Is this supposed to be *true*? If it isn't, *why* is he doing this?

And, much like Murphy, I thought: This is all wrong. A writer shouldn't use himself as a character in a story, shouldn't use the details of his own life to lend it conviction. A story should stand alone: it shouldn't need an Afterword to explain and justify it. And so on.

Shouldn't. Should. Shouldn't.

But then I thought: This story works.

For quite a while now, I've been having problems reading science fiction. The magazines piled up unread. Every so often I would pick up an issue and work my way through a few stories, reading as though through a fog, sometimes admiring a particular piece of writing or a new change on an old theme, even then remembering almost nothing of what I had read. Nearly everything seemed so formulaic, so predictable, so *unbelievable*.

A very few stories managed to cut through this haze. "Lost Boys" was one of them. Another (which I'll get to in a moment) was Bruce Sterling's "Dori Bangs." Both these stories, in their very different ways, break the rules.

Orson Scott Card could easily have written "Lost Boys" the conventional way. Call the narrator, say, Pete, give him a job as, say, a software developer (you really *shouldn't* write stories about writers: people will think you're writing about yourself. Probably they will anyhow, but why make it so easy for them?), set on everything else.

The story would still work. It would still get inside family life in a profound and moving way (I think almost every parent can resonate to the "lost" child, both as metaphor and as threat). It would still deliver its expected quotient of suspense and chills. It would still be one of Card's most powerful short stories.

But you would lose something. You would lose that momentary suspension of disbelief as you read the first few pages of the story and you wonder: did this really happen?

All science fiction and fantasy, of course, is supposed to create that suspension of disbelief. Almost none of it does, once you get past the age of twelve. Who really believes in Lazarus Long or Gully Foyle or Ender Wiggin? We're all postmodernists now. We may be entertained, but we're not going to *believe*.

So I can't find it in myself to criticize Card for wanting to write a story that, just for once, someone might actually believe, even for only a few minutes.

Sure, it's a trick, a stunt akin to rolling down Niagara Falls in a barrel. And sure, he'll never get away with it again. But he pulled it off once.

And I can't help but read a subtext in Pat Murphy's criticism (and in the comments attributed to other workshop participants). It's as if, at some level, they're saying, "That sonofabitch Card really had me

going there for a moment. You know, I could have done that, too, except that *it's against the rules.*"

Because, with all due respect to Pat Murphy, I didn't believe in her Rachel for a moment. But I did, just for a minute there, half-believe Orson Scott Card.

If Card had turned "Lost Boys" into conventional horror fiction, we might have admired the story, but we wouldn't have believed a word of it. We would have thought: Card has come up with a wonderful metaphor here. Maybe he lays it on a little thick in the Christmas Eve section. But on balance, here is a modern ghost story that actually works, one that you could mention in the same breath as Robert Aickman ... And so on.

These are all significant pleasures of the text for mature, post-modern readers. But they are quite different in kind from the pleasures that Card does deliver, which are considerably more regressive: that enjoyment of sinking down, however briefly, into the fictional world beneath the surface of the text, and believing, if only for a moment, that this fake world might possibly be the real world, that these lies might actually be true.

Card reminds us, in other words, of something that we all once experienced, long ago in the mists of personal time, in reading, or listening to, a "story." The fact that the story Card has to tell here is one of steadily growing horror doesn't make that pleasure any less real.

There's a certain irony here in finding Card, perhaps our most vocal defender of traditional story values, using what I must call a "trick" (and Pat Murphy calls a "cheat") to deliver this payoff. But it's also entirely consistent. Because these days, how else are you going to make people believe your stories, short of grabbing them by the throat and insisting that *this really happened?*

Having broken one set of rules, it is necessary for Card to break another. He must append to "Lost Boys" an Afterword in which he explains that the story is not actually true. Unlike Pat Murphy, I can only read this Afterword as an integral element of the story rather than an inadequate (if "genuinely moving") apologia. By commenting on his own text, Card kicks the story up to a whole new level of meaning. Exposing his own lies, he turns them into psychological truths.

Orson Scott Card is not someone you would usually think of as an experimental writer. But "Lost Boys" is a genuinely experimental story, one that tests the outer limits of what we call "fiction." So, in a very different way, does Bruce Sterling's "Dori Bangs" (*Asimov's*, September 1989).

"*The following story is a work of fantasy,*" warns the author's note at the front end. "*It is not reportage ... the author himself clearly has an artistic axe to grind — so don't take his word at face value...*"

Where Card feigns realism, Sterling gleefully regales us with lies: "comforting lies" is what he calls them. And where Card's tone is one of painful sincerity, Sterling's is knowing, flip, and at times almost insufferably hip. Like Card, Sterling breaks plenty of rules here. But he tells us about it as he goes along.

"Dori Bangs" is a fantasy about what might have happened if two real people, both of whom died young and alone, had managed to connect in real life. The two real people are Lester Bangs, a rock critic, and Dori Seda, an underground cartoonist. I had heard of Lester Bangs, but not of Dori Seda. I'm not sure that the average reader of *Asimov's* has heard of either one of them. The question is whether or not this matters.

When I laboured as a rock critic, Lester Bangs was one of my idols. Greil Marcus had greater insight, perhaps, and was certainly more lucid. But Bangs was rock and roll. Reading Marcus you might learn something. But only Bangs could make you howl with laughter. See, for example, "James Taylor Marked For Death," in Bangs's posthumous Marcus-edited collection *Psychotic Reactions and Carburetor Dung* (Knopf, 1987). As a critic, I might aspire (only aspire) to be as good as Marcus. But no one could hope to touch Lester Bangs (although they tried, God knows).

So I cared about Lester Bangs. And I was sad when he died. And I could understand why Sterling would want to make him live again, if only for a moment. And those who knew and cared about Dori Seda no doubt felt the same. But I still had to wonder: was that reason enough to write this story?

In Sterling's conceit, Lester Bangs doesn't die alone in his apartment of an overdose of Darvon on top of flu on top of too many years of hard living. Instead he goes to San Francisco and meets Dori Seda, who as a result doesn't die of flu on top of auto injuries on top of too much equally hard living. Instead Dori and Lester eventually get married, and Dori Seda becomes Dori Bangs.

Dori and Lester have their problems, like most people, but they work through them. Ultimately they give up self-destruction ("awfully tiring"), get quasi-regular jobs, "eat balanced meals, go to bed early." Lester finishes the novel he always dreamed of writing, but it gets "panned and quickly remaindered." Finally he dies, after some 33 years of extra Sterling-given life, shoveling snow off his lawn.

What we have here, in other words, is an alternate universe story in which the Germans don't win, and the Romans don't invent the steam engine. None of that world-shattering stuff. Just two people who live on rather than dying young, not always happily, not for ever after.

It seems a lot of work, somehow, to approach such a muffled conclusion. But Sterling knows exactly where he's going.

A year after Lester's death, Dori has a vision of The Child They Never Had. "Don't worry ..." The Child tells her, in Sterling's best bit of Bangs pastiche, "... you two woulda been no prize as parents."

Dori asks The Child if their lives *meant* anything. "... were you Immortal Artists leaving indelible graffiti in the concrete sidewalk of Time, no ... you were just people. But it's better to have a real life than no life."

All of which serves to set up Sterling's meditations on the Meaning of Art: "Art can't make you immortal," The Child tells Dori. "Art can't Change the World. Art can't even heal your soul. All it can do is maybe ease the pain a bit or make you feel more awake. And that's enough ..."

I quote from this exchange at some length, not only because it breaks a whole bunch more rules (*don't* put words in your characters' mouths; *don't* lecture your readers, except maybe in *Analog*), but because it's such wonderful stuff. It bears very directly on the life of Lester Bangs, who really did once think that rock and roll could Change the World (so did I, so did I) and maybe died, in some sense, of his own disillusion. It bears also, for those who care about such things, on the career of Bruce Sterling as Chief Propagandist of cyberpunk. And, in a broader sense, it bears on every one of us engaged in writing these "comforting lies."

This in itself might be enough to justify the risks Sterling takes in this story. But there's more. In the final paragraphs, Sterling makes his most omniscient authorial intervention of all (yeah, he really shouldn't) to remind us that Dori and Lester really did die, although "simple real-life acts of human caring, at the proper moment, might have saved them both ... And so they went down into darkness, like skaters, breaking through the hard bright shiny surface of our true-facts world."

I have never thought of Bruce Sterling as a particularly emotional writer. His best work has a coolness of tone at times reminiscent of Wells or Stapledon. (*Islands In The Net* is at its weakest, for me, when it tries so heroically to focus on the characters' personal relationships.) But "Dori Bangs" is most affecting and true at the same moments that it is being most artificial and contrived and self-consciously hip.

I don't know exactly how Sterling does this, and I'm not sure that he could do it again, or that he would want to. But it was the best story I read that year.

No doubt Bruce Sterling is going to run into some heavy flak for the violations of conventional narrative that he perpetrates in "Dori Bangs" — and it wouldn't surprise me to see Orson Scott Card in the firing line. But both authors are in a sense writing their way out of exactly the same dilemma.

I don't really have much of a conclusion to offer here, except the obvious and rote one, which is that rules exist to be broken, if you have good enough reason to do so, and if — a sizeable if — you can find an editor willing to go along with you. I do know that Card and Sterling made *me* feel more awake, and that's worth more to me than proper narrative decorum. *