

IF YOU COULD CHOOSE

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FOR WRITERS MOSTLY

BECAUSE of the lavishly attractive novel contest being sponsored jointly by GALAXY and Simon & Schuster, the biggest in the history of science fiction, it's inevitable that authors who are unfamiliar with this field will be studying the magazine to learn what kind of material we are seeking.

To save their time and ours, here is a partial list of overworked ideas that should be strenuously avoided:

Fictional warnings of nuclear and biological destruction, the post-atomic world, reversion to barbarism, mutant children slain because they have only ten toes and fingers instead of twelve, absurdly planned and posterously successful revolts against dictatorships, problems of survival wearily turned over to women, war between groups, nations, worlds and solar systems.

Flying Saucers, cops and robbers or cowboys and Indians in space, the duel between the good guy and the bad guy alone on an asteroid, the bright revelation that the characters we have been reading about are Adam and Eve or Jesus, the creation of a miniature universe in a laboratory by a scientist whose name turns out to be an anagram of Jehovah, the

alien eater of life force in the Andes whose menu consists exclusively of pretty virgins.

There are many more that slither across my desk, to lie there pulsing feebly while they acquire rejection slips, but the debilitated notions listed are readiest to mind.

From time to time, writers can still make them come to life through rarely encountered virtuosity. The odds on that happening are not worth taking, however. The best advice to follow is to learn how to hunt down fresh themes or new approaches to old ones. What's done with the idea is then a matter of talent and skill, neither of which can be taught here, but the basic steps in science fiction thinking can be presented.

First of all, science fiction answers in *dramatic terms* the unstated question: "What would happen if—?"

The *if* selected depends on whether the author takes the most blatant trends or tendencies in our society, in which case he is competing with just about everybody else, or digs beneath the surface for less apparent ones. Those, obviously, rate and receive the more enthusiastic welcome.

Political conflicts and wars,

however gigantic, have a way of becoming obscured by time. But the inventions and discoveries that were being made then live long after the issues are resolved.

Kaiser Wilhelm, for example, quickly turned into a pathetic figure after his defeat; the development of planes, tanks, long-range artillery and submarines was the lasting influence of World War I. Even Hitler has lost much of his frightfulness, while jets, rockets, atomic energy and antibiotics, all of which got their start in World War II, will be part of the life of the future.

What will be remembered when the threat of communism is gone? That's what the writer has to find and dramatize for us.

SPACE travel is perhaps the most popular subject in science fiction and writers have suggested all kinds of crews: introverts because they can take loneliness, extroverts because they get along better with each other, women because they tolerate monotony, men because they are more adventurous. The reasoning is generally sound enough, but aren't there other possibilities?

Gravy Planet offered a midget spaceman, 60 pounds of computer and pilot, an enormous saving of fuel, food, air renewal and living space.

Why not deaf mutes? The noise

of takeoff and landing wouldn't bother them, and they've been conditioned to the awful silence of the void. The blind, on the other hand, wouldn't be appalled by the immensities of space.

Missionaries have always been on the heels of explorers, yet what would happen if they came across a humanoid race—not the usual monstrosities—on a planet where personal death is unknown? There are savages on Earth who don't have this knowledge, but they soon pick it up, and fear along with it. Suppose, though, that the alien bodies disintegrate instantly at death? The concept of afterlife would be completely unthinkable to them.

The canals of Mars irrigate the deserts? Not necessarily. *Maybe they're meant to drain the land and keep it suitably arid for Martians.*

Well, there's the method of finding fresh ideas—turn the obvious upside down, inside out and hind-end fore.

Actually, digging up ideas is only the beginning of the job. Next comes choosing characters, building conflict, sustaining suspense, advancing the story, working out a solution consistent with theme and characterization—all the labor of orchestration.

It's hard, lonesome work, but who said writing is easy?

—H. L. GOLD