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The Leading and Largest Writer's Magazine

# Writer's Digest

December, 1941

Boy, Do I Feel Lousy

By Mabel Dana Lyons

On one of those days that every author has, Novelist Lyons makes faces at her muse

Taboos For Juvenile Writers

By Margaret Sander

Things that editors hide from little tots

A New Market For Short-Shorts

By Robert Turner

The comic magazines use short-shorts, and pay from one cent to 3 cents a word for them

New York, Chicago and Cleveland Market Letters

By Harriet A. Bradfield and Staff

The Sky's The Limit

By Harold Q. Masur

The personal history of a young author who three short years ago was completely unknown and has now sold over one hundred stories

An Idea A Day

The Writer's Market

Humor Markets  
The Forum

TWENTY-FIVE CENTS



# WRITER'S DIGEST

Vol. XXII

*The Leading and Largest Writer's Magazine*

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# Realm of Wonder

By OSCAR J. FRIEND

Assistant Editor, Standard Magazines, Inc.

CONTRARY to popular belief, science fiction did not have its inception with the coming of Jules Verne. It has a more ancient and perhaps less venerable ancestry. When lightning struck the first tree and created fire in the sight of an apish mammal, when that primitive troglodyte first noticed that the sun rose in the east and sank in the west, when that inarticulate cave-man first picked up a stick or a stone and discovered he had thumbs—right there was the true origin of science and science fiction.

Why? Because it brought a reaction of wonder. Of curiosity. Of imagination. Such crude beginnings taught early man to begin to think. And everything—and I use the word in its fullest sense—that we see and have around us today was first dreamed of in some human mind. Of course, the universe and the natural wonders were not. Don't go technical on me. But our understanding of these things and laws of physics, such as it is, stems from mental effort on the part of many minds.

Down through the ages when mysticism and ignorance and dawning knowledge fought bitterly one against the other, we have ample evidence of the stimulation of man's sheer imagination. He learns all he knows by two

methods only—comparison and contrast. We have the fables and legends of antiquity to show how the ancients combined what they observed or heard with stories to entertain.

To prevent this brief article from becoming a dry resumé of the history of science fiction, let us skip the folklore, the wandering minstrels, the Arabian Nights, the ghost legends

and the classic examples of history and get down to brass tacks. I'm calmly shrugging off not less than five thousand years of documentary evidence in a couple of paragraphs, but why re-hash information nearly everybody—what's that? How do I reconcile the foregoing legend-dary stuff with science fiction? All right, put 'em up. You asked for it by thinking ahead of me.

Have you forgotten Doctor Faustus?

Dr. Jekell and Mr. Hyde? The age-long search for the Philosopher's Stone (which is drawing to a close with the development of the cyclotron)? The Fountain of Youth? Literature is ripe with science fiction in one form or another.

Today science fiction—admittedly escapist literature—is not the wild imagery of a lunatic. It is the prophecy of tomorrow's actualities. Some of the themes are almost incredible, true, but they have basis in scientific

Oscar J. Friend is a pharmacist, a writer and an editor. He has been writing for about twenty years, having some twenty-odd Western and detective novels to his credit and numerous short stories, poems and articles. He has read science fiction, he tells us, ever since he was old enough to read, and has been doing considerable scientifiiction writing the past three years.

He is married, has two grown daughters, lives in a Long Island suburb—commuting to the United States five days a week, as he puts it—is inclined to stoutness, has no outstanding vices or virtues, enjoys the same things that most all normal Americans like from hot dogs to grand opera, and his present hobby is ping-pong.

From "Who's Who in America" we learn that Oscar J. Friend is a Methodist, a Mason, and writes his mystery stories under the pseudonym of Owen Fox Jerome. From personal contact we can assure you that Friend is a regular fellow with a sly touch of humor, plenty broad-minded, and withal, a swell gentleman from the Southwest.

facts, and even the wildest may not be as fantastic as they may now seem.

What is the wildest science fiction theme we can think of off-hand? Space travel? Gravitation nullifiers? Voyages in time? I can think of nothing more startling at the moment, but take your pick. Certainly you won't choose ray guns or thinking robots. These latter items are not in even this afternoon's mail. They are already here and in operation under one guise or another.

Sir Isaac Newton experimented with burning glasses and prisms. The ancient Egyptians had sun mirrors. What are these but variations of ray guns? But you want something more in the way of a concrete example? Then how about the photo-selenium cell, the electric eye, the shattering power of vibration by magnification, the sheer power of amplified sound?

Oh, you want an example such as Captain Future's ray gun which shoots beautifully colored rings for the purpose of art work on the covers of *Captain Future*? Well, the charring and disintegrating and paralysis ray are just around the corner.

The thinking robot? I won't insult your intelligence by mentioning at great length the mechanical robots which have been constructed. Instead, let me point out the huge machine in Washington, D. C. which charts the weather. Or another mathematical machine which juggles equations and calculus. You feed your weather dope or your problem into either of these machines and set them in motion, and they grind out as neat a weather chart or correct answer as an Einstein can arrive at with a quart of midnight oil.

Automatically this brings us to that second hard nut—gravitation nullification. Did any of you visit the House of Magic at the New York World's Fair? Among numerous demonstrated experiments with light rays, radio beams, the magical effect of the stroboscope (which slows down motion by means of light so you can see a speeding bullet or the individual teeth of rapidly revolving gears—etc. for the benefit of those who came in late) General Electric displayed an instrument which quite satisfactorily nullified and controlled gravity—at least, as far as steel discs were concerned.

Perhaps I should mention here that a variation of a ray gun was also demonstrated to admiring throngs. By radio-controlled beam eggs or meat could be cooked on a sheet of paper, or in a skillet without fire of any kind. Yes, controlled heat rays which could be focused.

The story is endless. The field is so vast that even a scientist—and I do not pretend to be more than a science fiction editor—could not begin to cover it in a whole book.

**W**HAT is the realm of wonder? As far as I am concerned, it is centered in three science fiction magazines, namely, *Thrilling Wonder Stories*, *Startling Stories*, and *Captain Future*. My work with these periodicals is one of the most interesting jobs I have ever done. I never met a more enthusiastic and wide-awake circle of readers and thinkers.

There is no age, race or class distinction. Science fiction fans number legions. I have noted with the heartiest approval that this type of fiction is gaining strength in feminine ranks. More and more girls and women are learning that a little knowledge, coated by science fiction, is a pleasant and highly entertaining thing. Fan magazines and fan conventions blossom like flowers under irrigation.

What does STANDARD MAGAZINES, INC., want in science fiction?

I'll try to make it brief and to the point. Mr. Ned Pines, the publisher, Mr. Margulies, the editorial director, and I have discussed the field and our problems many times. We hold that science fiction has a great future as well as an illustrious past. Our fundamental rule is that the stories should be about people or sympathetic entities. We bar no story because of its slant—whether whimsical, fantastic, humorous, tragic—so long as it violates no national tabus and conforms generally to what is expected of pulp fiction. For instance, we don't want sexy stuff, glorification of any criminal tendencies, or the ridicule of any sect or faction.

The story must concern people with their personal problems, their emotions, their reactions to conflict. The story must depict what goes on in their lives to build up suspense and



drama. And all this is to be delineated against the back-drop of science fiction.

We do not want a dull story full of scientific gadgets or pseudo-technical terminology. A little, yes. But when an author sets forth the premise that Professor Watt A. Belch has invented a new mono-rail car with a cafeteria attachment that will serve breakfast on the way to the office and wipe the egg off the owner's chin as he alights; or offers the delightful theory that Phineas Z. Crackpot has perfected a new serum which will grow three hands on every human, so that a man can hitch-hike a ride, thumb his nose and scratch his—ah—neck simultaneously—if such stuff is to prove what a boon to future or present civilization this is, we want the story to show this by the effects on characters in the story and their reactions to the problems which will automatically arise.

If science is going to make a Utopia of earth tomorrow, we want the author to show what and how his hypothetical or imaginary invention works on the people and how it complicates things for the characters in the story, instead of glibly throwing in a lot of pseudo-scientific gibberish and then prosaically proceeding with a trite and worn-out plot of palace intrigue or world conquest surrounded by technicolor smoke-rings and plastic dingbats.

Certainly, we accept whimsical yarns, even those verging on the fantastic—if the author justifies his premise with a slight aura of scientific explanation. We do not want any dreams or fairy tales as such. We want each story to read as though, through the magical alchemy of science, it could possibly happen. Deal with little intimate problems and human foibles and frailties, limning them against the background of science—any sort of science, whether in a laboratory in Oskosh or a tenth dimensional spiral whirl approaching Arc-turus. Never mind the mad dictatorships and the warring between planets; we've seen and read enough of that stuff.

The most ordinary set-up or situation between two men, or between a man and a woman, can, against a scientific back-drop, become a gripping and compelling, brand

new story. Get human interest into the yarns, and we'll help you justify the science.

We don't know and don't care what other publishers strive for. We know that we want human interest stories that live and vibrate and throb with understandable emotion and conflict, with just enough queer science and stuff to pique the reader's imagination and make him realize that he has thumbs.

What are our general requirements?

*Thrilling Wonder Stories*: Lead novelets of 20,000-word lengths. Second lead novelets of from 8,000 to not a word over 12,000 words. Shorts from 1,000 to not a word over 6,000 words. The subject matter is up to the author, within the limits already outlined. Primarily, the story must entertain. The science is secondary, but it must be there. Spread it on as thick as you like as long as it is fundamentally sound or theoretically tenable—and does not kill the story value.

*Startling Stories*: Here a science fiction writer has a chance to expand his pet theorems. We use lead novels of 45,000 words in length. Short stories from 1,000 to 5,000 words. The general concepts are the same as for *Thrilling Wonder*, although we prefer to see a synopsis of the novel before the author tackles such a job, and we gladly offer improvement suggestions.

*Captain Future*: This magazine has the lead novel written under contract. But we use short stories of from 1,000 to 5,000 words in length.

Now have at it. The address is 10 East 40th Street, N. Y. C. Never write science fiction with your tongue in your cheek. Never poke fun, not even subtly, at science fiction itself. We science fiction fans take our meat seriously.

As for you skeptics—you like cars and radios and patented gadgets that make life more pleasant yourselves, don't you? That's what I thought. Now you're cooking with gas! And I don't mean hot air.

When you write science fiction, you are writing the prophecies of tomorrow such as once made persons called Nostradamus and Mother Shipton famous. Send us good science fiction stories. We'll buy and print them.