Practices

Tomorrowing

Terry Bisson

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Kim Stanley Robinson,
Locus,
and Judy . . . "Still the One"

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PREFACE

April 1, 2004. Locus *magazine, the* Variety *of the science fiction and fantasy field, publishes its first This Month in History feature, thus beginning, with little notice or fanfare, what is destined to become the longest-running trade magazine fiction feature in the universe*.

True story, not an April fool.

The idea came to me from a newspaper; I forget which one. I had been a working science fiction writer for some twenty years in New York, and newspapers are fodder for SF story ideas. For fun I always checked out the Today or This Day in History features: those with events everyone remembers—wars, disasters, elections, assassinations, and so forth.

One day, I forget which one, the idea came to me: Why not move the history to the future? It seemed an easy idea for any SF writer, a group who often regard the future as their native

land, or at least their hometown. And I was surprised that no one had thought of it before. A small but interesting idea, and I could play it for humor, for horror, for SF spec, for maybe all together.

Meanwhile, my wife, Judy, and I were planning to move to California, so I pitched the idea to Eileen Gunn, a writer and editor who had just started Infinite Matrix, an SF website financed with Silicon Valley money. Eileen could pay top dollar, so she cast for the big names—Ursula Le Guin, Bill Gibson, Lucius Shepard, Bruce Sterling, &c—and I was eager to be included in such company.

"Sure," Eileen said. "Could be fun. Have at it."

So I did up a few items for her, I forget which ones, and they appeared on Infinite Matrix as This Week in History. But appearing once per day, without the monthly framing device, my few lines didn't get much notice. They looked lost. Plus, Eileen's website was livelier and more varied than any SF magazine (my usual markets) could be, and her big names included underground comix greats like Gilbert Shelton and Paul Mavrides of *The Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers*. Overwhelmed and outperformed, I moved on to bigger projects (some with Eileen) and let my original idea slip away.

Meanwhile, Judy and I moved to California and found a house in Oakland.

There I got to know *Locus* and Charles Brown. They were sort of the same thing. Charles was already a legend in the tiny but close-knit world of SF. He was not a writer but a serious reader—an intelligent, worldly, cultured SF fan who knew and kept up with the field and all the writers. His *Locus* in the early 1970s was originally an 8 × 11 fanzine focusing on SF and

"published" as a stapled, xeroxed giveaway. Under Charles, *Locus* survived and flourished. By the time I moved to the Bay Area in 2002, *Locus* was a slick four-color monthly, flush with SF publishers' ads and filled with reviews, interviews, award news, convention pics, and industry gossip about agents, authors, editors, and fans. Everything about SF but SF itself. It was now the official trade magazine of the SF and fantasy publishing field. Still is.

It was published out of Charles's house in Oakland Hills. Charles was the William Shawn of *Locus*, the moody wizard in chief, but the magazine itself was put together every month by a very capable, by now professional, handpicked team of sharp young SF enthusiasts, mostly attractive women (a weakness Charles treasured) and a few guys and some interns. I had of course met Charles at SF cons, but only for a handshake with the old guy who knew everybody and who everybody knew. Now I was a local writer, a neighbor, and I was always welcome to drop by. And often did.

I liked the whole *Locus* crew, but Charles and I hit it off big-time. A certifiable eccentric who sometimes padded around the "office" barefoot, he was often gruff and demanding (especially of his staff) but always confidently brilliant—even scholarly and clever—with a shrewd understanding of genre literature and what it could, and shouldn't, do. A largely self-educated navy vet, he loved SF for the literary life it had given him, and he made *Locus* a home for every type—the high and the low. I often hung out with him after his younger staff had split for the day. Charles was old and fat and slow (and knew it), but I was pushing sixty myself, and he liked that. He liked my work, and I liked that. He was from Brooklyn, and he liked that I was

also a nostalgic New Yorker of a different but familiar sort—the small-town kid who seeks the city and stays. He took me to the San Francisco Symphony, for which he had season tickets and needed a friend to drive and park his car. I was part of the *Locus* circle at the cons around the United States—and even in China once, for SF is international and Charles always needed a luggage wrangler. There were parties, too, and I got to know his famous friends and adversaries, for he hung closely to both. Tight with money and parsimonious with praise, Charles was generous with Scotch (always single malt) and high-end wine.

I think he also liked the fact that, already established in the field, I wasn't trying to get something out of him. One night we were musing about the role of luck in literature, the perils of freelancing, or some such, and I remembered my This Week in History that hadn't quite worked on Eileen's Infinite Matrix website, which was already part of SF history. Charles shrugged, I seem to remember, and said, "*Locus* needs a monthly. We could give it a shot. I can give you fifty bucks."

I hadn't pitched it, but he had caught it. And as usual he was right. I think I shrugged OK. Then he got fresh glasses and poured us both another shot of Scotch. Every variety of single malt, according to Charles, requires a differently shaped snifter. That night was Highland Park, from Orkney.

There was never a word from Charles or *Locus* about what This Month in History should be. It was entirely up to me. I decided I could handle four short items a month, and the items soon developed a tone. One of the *Locus* staff, Amelia Beamer, described it as a "satire or parody of journalese," and I realized, *Of course!* I was keeping it attached to its newspaper roots. Fiction as fact.

So that was the first rule, and it still holds. Every item started with an event. Often (not always) led with a headline. The results of that event reported rather than explained, and rather dryly as well.

The rest of the process emerged from SF itself, but easily, as the feature embodies my tendencies in SF. The items were all separate, unrelated, each with a different novelty or surprise or insight. There was usually an item about outer space or other planets, in keeping with SF's origins as a promotional literature for space travel. No goblins or wizards or magic rings, please. The tomorrows are usually only a century or two away, in keeping with Kim Stanley Robinson's understanding that SF is mostly about the present. I tried to mix a little good news with the bad, as I found the dystopian tone of today's SF tiresome.

Oh, and shorter was better. I got less wordy as the months and years rolled by. Getting with the process was easy for me, for I made it up as I went along. Charles never said anything about it, which was his way, which I took as approval.

In 2009, when Charles Brown died, as we all must do, he did it in his own way: peacefully, flying home in business class from Readercon in New England with a pretty woman from his staff by his side. He fell asleep and never woke up—an unforgettable, accomplished, and lucky man.

He left *Locus* and the house to "the girls" as he (still, sometimes) called them, though they had long outgrown his more antediluvian notions. The *Locus* staff was already diversified and capable, and the magazine has flourished under their manly as well as womanly hands. The formidably talented Liza Trombi took the helm and even gave me a raise. I sometimes wryly refer

to This Month in History as my day job, as if anyone could live on eighty bucks a month. But in its own way, it is.

That's the end of this story, twenty years ago; but it begins some sixty years before.

I had never intended to be a science fiction writer. True, SF was my first literature as a teen in the 1950s—the golden age of Ray Bradbury, Arthur C. Clarke, Clifford Simak, Isaac Asimov. Paperbacks with rocket-ship covers in drugstore racks, in a town without bookstores, taught me what literature could do: stir the imagination, even the soul. By the 1960s I had moved on to Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, J. D. Salinger—more serious stuff. The Beat Generation lit me up like a roman candle, particularly Jack Kerouac's epic Byronic needfulness. Big boy stuff.

I knew only one sure thing: I wanted to be a writer. So I wrote a Kerouacian clone and (surprise!) interested a literary agent and split for the city. In another era (another bildungsroman) it would have been London or Paris, but for me, for small-town America, it was New York City, of course.

And, of course, the novel never sold. Novels rarely do, and first novels hardly ever. My agent strolled away. But there I was, in the beating heart of the publishing world! I wrote for romance, astrology, and Western magazines and supermarket tabloids ("Sasquatch Marries California Teen"); I took on paperback cover copy, even book catalogs and comics and kids' books. It was hack work, but I was a writer, wasn't I? It was mostly fun, and I was learning the ropes, wasn't I?

Meanwhile, I devoted my mornings to my next, my new, my real, my soon-to-be-celebrated novel. It had to be perfect, of course, and the longer I worked on it, the shorter it got. Revising my revisions was miserable work. I dreaded those mornings.

Then I got lucky.

I was writing cover copy for David Hartwell, the editor of a paperback fantasy and SF series—some old, some new. One day he sat me down and said, "Your high fantasy copy has the right tone, the syntax and the sound." (He meant pompous faux-biblical.) "Why not write the book as well?" Huh? "Give me a two-page plot outline, and I can advance you fifteen hundred dollars."

Write a novel for money? "No, no, no," I said. For all the right reasons. I was a serious wannabe mainstream novelist, no hack, and I held out resolutely for several weeks before I caved and went to work. I made $1,600 and learned that you don't have to write a masterpiece. You just have to make up a story and spin it out well. A serious lesson and a liberating one.

Hartwell published my first book (to slim success) and sat me down again. "Now write the book you want to write," he said. So I did. I put in it everything I knew about the South, small towns, girls and cars and guns, and made up the rest. And guess what? It was SF! It was fantasy! All in a weird mix, which meant that it was no bestseller but got read by the right people. It got noticed.

David Hartwell, one of the now-legendary creators of modern SF, was my editor for the next several decades. I soon knew all the SF editors, most of the writers, and many of the fans. He had plunged me into the world that I wanted (without know-

ing it) and that now wanted me (at least a little). It was then a small and welcoming world, with writers both very good and just good enough. And I had made the team!

Science fiction is an often-overlooked, sometimes-scorned genre in which the play of ideas is often the action; an outlier of literature, even dismissed as less than art: rock 'n' roll, not a symphony. (Some of us like that.) But I was at home there and still am. That's why Hartwell and Charles Brown are the proper bookends for this book. David pulled me into SF, and Charles gave me my longest assignment. Which is still my day job.

But enough about me. And This Month in History can speak for itself. I describe it on my website (easy to find) as "the longest-running trade magazine fiction feature in the Universe," which, I suppose, in fact, it is.

And here, finally (firstly?), it is. In full.