



The Plot's the Thing

By

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“Persons attempting to find a motive in this narrative will be prosecuted; persons attempting to find a moral in it will be banished; persons attempting to find a plot in it will be shot.”

Mark Twain (1835–1910), U.S. author. *Huckleberry Finn*, “By Order of the Author,” “Notice” (1884).

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Ask any professional writer to name the hardest part of writing a book or story, and nine times out of ten, they will tell you “the beginning.” There is no feeling worse than sitting at your typewriter and staring at a nearly blank sheet of paper on which you have typed Chapter 1, Page 1. Nor has the transition from typewriters to computers helped this problem.

“But of course the beginning is the hardest,” you reply. “The writer doesn’t know what to write at that point in the story.” True, but probably not in the way that you mean it. The problem isn’t caused by not having any words to write, but rather, by having a superabundance of them. In fact, the infinite number of possibilities that I face at the beginning of a story is just about the most intimidating thing I know. Of all the words in the English language (or whatever language you write in), which is just the right word to use? After the first, what is the right second word, and third, and fourth . . . ad infinitum.

One of the more famous writers of our time (whose name I have forgotten) once said that writing isn’t difficult. You merely stare at a blank sheet of paper until droplets of blood pop out on your forehead. Having written nine novels and numerous short stories, I can testify to the accuracy of the observation.

Last month, I suggested that you visualize the varying levels of tension in a story to be like climbing a mountain. The periods of high tension are the peaks and low tension, the valleys. In this chapter I would suggest you consider that starting a story is like standing on the edge of a vast grassy plain, a savanna covered with waist-high grass waving gently in the breeze. As you stand there at its edge, the plain appears to be absolutely featureless, devoid even of the rolling hills that might give you a vantage point from which to spy out the lay of the land.

It isn’t featureless, of course. You know that this particular savanna has been a caravan route for centuries, and hidden in the tall grass are the bleached bones of horses and camels, some of which still have sacks of jewels and gold strapped to their backs. There are hidden wells of sparkling cold water at which you can refresh yourself. There

are all manner of rusty artifacts dropped by the caravans of yore, and then covered by the vegetation. And, of course, there are dangers.

This particular plain is the home of a silent killer, a very poisonous snake that lies in wait for its prey and strikes from the cover of the grass. There are also lions out there, crouched invisibly low, with only their yellow eyes and the tips of their ears showing as they scan the great grassy plain for prey.

You, the writer, are standing on the verge of this vast, featureless grassland. You have donned your knee-high snake-proof boots, have your pith helmet perched firmly on your head, have sufficient supplies for your journey in the bulging pack on your back, and have your trusty 30-06 hunting rifle hanging from its strap over your right shoulder. You are ready to head off into the grassland in search of the lost treasure you know to be out there.

So, which way do you go?

It's a quandary, isn't it? Those sacks of gold and jewels would come in very handy. Do you just plunge in blindly and hope to stumble across the treasure you seek? Or do you plan a meticulous search, quartering each acre of ground until you have mapped its contents? Neither approach seems particularly attractive. After all, your supplies are limited and so is your time. You can only carry so many days supply of food on your back. Wandering around blindly will likely get you lost, while searching each acre meticulously will likely cause you to run out of food before you lose sight of the edge of the savanna.

A writer starting a story faces almost precisely the situation with which our intrepid explorer is confronted. That sheet of paper or computer screen is very, *very* blank and the writer has to start making tracks on it. But what if those first words send the story off in the wrong direction? Both you and the readers will get lost and will be no closer to the goal when you run out of your allotted story length.

But, wait! A writer is, in essence, God! At least, we are gods to the fictional people we create. We have no need to stumble around aimlessly in our fictional grassland. Since we are the almighty beings in this particular universe, we can place the treasure anywhere we want it and make a beeline straight for the gold.

The only problem with this Mount Olympian approach is that it will bore our readers to tears.

No, in order to tell an entertaining story, we must strike off into the waist-high grass, heading in the direction of the treasure, but never directly to it. Along the way we must encounter a certain number of snakes, and possibly spend a few pages being stalked by a lion. At the midpoint of our journey, after we are hungry and exhausted, we unexpectedly encounter one of those wells of cool water. Then having slaked our thirst, we are just getting comfortable when we smell smoke. Jumping up, we discover that we must run for our lives in front of a wind driven wildfire.

Only after striving mightily do we discover the bleached bones of an ancient gold caravan that was once attacked by marauders. Hallelujah! But we have one problem left. How are we going to find our way off the savanna? Luckily, everywhere we walked, we left a trail of beaten down grass, a trail that we can easily follow home again.

If the vast grassland represents all of the possibilities that face a writer at the beginning of a story, what does the trail of beaten down grass represent when we reach

the story's end? Quite simply, those are the events and incidents the writer used to move the story along in an interesting manner while travelling from the edge of the savanna to the spot where the gold caravan died. In other words, the beaten down trail is the story's plot!

plot (plòt) *noun*

1. **a.** A small piece of ground, generally used for a specific purpose: *a garden plot; a cemetery plot.* **b.** A measured area of land; a lot.
2. A ground plan, as for a building; a diagram.
3. See GRAPH.
4. **The plan of events or main story in a narrative or drama.**
5. A secret plan to accomplish a hostile or illegal purpose; a scheme.

What is plot, anyway?

The plot of a story is basically the list of all events in the story that get you from page one to page last. A good plot will basically suck the reader into the story in the first paragraph and will not let them up for air until they read those magic words: THE END. A bad plot will remind the readers of wading through hot tar up to their necks. Whichever reaction is attained is strictly a function of the skill the writer puts into his or her craft.

So how does one plot a story, anyway? One of the time-honored methods is to start at the beginning of the story and work your way through to the end. Of course, this can be much more difficult to do than to say. After all, we are still faced with that endless sea of wind-rippled grass through which we must cut a discernable trail.

When I first began writing nearly 30 years ago, my literary aspirations were relatively modest. All I really wanted to do was get a story published in my favorite magazine, *Analog Science Fiction/ Science Fact*. At that time, the editor of *Analog* was Ben Bova, who in addition to having been editor, is a famous science fiction writer in his own right.

For three-and-a-half years I sent Ben Bova stories that would inevitably come back rejected. My first story, *Morrison's Mountain*, came back with what I learned to call a No. 3 Rejection. (Basically, many publishers and magazines have a graduated set of rejection letters. The lowest is the preprinted form giving you the editorial requirements of the magazine or publishing house. This means that they probably didn't even read your manuscript. Then there is the form letter stating, "Thank you for submitting your story to us, but we find it not quite suitable for our needs." This is the second level rejection. A third level rejection reads like the second, but adds, "... please try us again sometime." to the death sentence. What this means is that they see some possibility that you will one day produce publishable work. The fourth level of rejection is a personalized letter on the order of "Dear, Mike, this stinks!" When you start receiving personalized criticisms of your work from the editors, it means that you are nearly there.)

What has this to do with plot? Only that Ben Bova has called a story a ticking time bomb, and the plot is the method by which you hear the bomb ticking. The reader should hear that ticking timer on the first page, and the ticking should grow progressively louder until the bomb explodes, which it does at the climax. If you have any element in

your story that doesn't contribute to the ticking, then remove it. It has no place in your story.

This advice is especially important if you are writing short stories, where space is limited. It is equally important for novels. You don't want to insert long boring sections into a novel, especially if they have little bearing on the story (fans of James Michener, take note). However, the rigor with which the "no extraneous material" rule is enforced is reduced in a novel due to the greater space available.

So how does one go about plotting a story?

It depends.

As you can see from the dictionary excerpt in the box, the word "plot" has a number of different meanings. Except for the first, "a small piece of ground," all meanings of the word denote planning and organization.

Whether you are designing a building, graphing a function, planning the events of a narrative or drama, or hatching a secret plan to accomplish something hostile or illegal, the verb "to plot" denotes a degree of preplanning on someone's part. It is possible to build a house without a ground plan, and to take over a government without actually planning out the act, but in either case, the result will be less successful than if you plan it in advance. So it is with writing. You can build a narrative story without planning, but it is likely to be more successful if you take the time to think it through.

So does that mean you have to work out the entire plot in advance? No, but you need to have a good idea where your story is going. If you, the godlike author, don't have any inkling of where the gold is hidden in the sea of grass, you could spend a lot of time wandering around aimlessly before you stumble onto its location. A good rule of thumb is that the characters shouldn't be able to see into the future, but that the author must! You not knowing where you are going is worse than the characters seeming to know before they get there: "*Harry was overcome with a nameless dread, and well he should be had he known what the morrow would bring!*" (That is known as false suspense and it is a major no-no, although I've noticed that my favorite author, Tom Clancy, seems to use it more than he ought to.)

When I began writing short stories, I just *began writing short stories*. I would sit down at my typewriter, type the title of the piece, and start writing. That was the extent of my preparation. Or was it? Actually, I usually spent two weeks to a month mulling the story over in my head prior to beginning writing. What is the point of the story? Who are the characters? Why do they care about the problem I am posing? What were they doing the day before the story begins? How about the year before?

So my efforts weren't totally without planning, just totally without *written* planning. Not that I knew everything that was going to happen in the story, but at least I knew the basic skeleton of it. Character A has a problem, which he shares with Character B, who in turn meets Character C, who gets into a fight with Character D, and in the meantime, the whole planet is going to blow up around them! With this knowledge lodged firmly in my brain, I would sit down to write. And after writing a bit, I would stop and go back to rewrite. I would do this until something strange happened to me. At some point in the story the characters would take over and all I needed to do was sit back and read the words as they magically flowed forth.

“So the story just wrote itself, huh?” you ask, incredulously. Actually, it did (and it does) much of the time. Getting started is always difficult, not only because of the infinite number of choices, but also because the characters don't yet feel like real people. It can take me weeks before I am sufficiently comfortable with a story that the characters suddenly come alive. When they do, however, the story takes off and zooms for anything from a few thousand words to a few chapters. Then the story bogs down again. I refer to this phase as “overrunning my headlights” because, like an automobile traveling too quickly at night, I get beyond where I can see the plot clearly. When I progress beyond where I have thought things through, I am forced to mark time until I have thought through the next section. At that point the story flows effortlessly again until I hit the next stopping place.

I have mostly been speaking of short story writing up to this point. When you graduate to novels, life becomes a little more structured. The reason for this is simple. Where short story writers write their works and then sell them, novel writers usually sell their books in advance. Editors aren't likely to give you that million dollar advance (don't laugh, it has happened) until they know what it is that you will be writing about. So the editors force you to plan by the simple expedient of withholding your contract until you present them with a proposal they like.

A proposal is a synopsis of what the story is about. It can run from a few sentences to one-third of a book. In Hollywood, they have something they call a “high concept proposal,” which is essentially telling the story in a single short sentence like, “the Brady Bunch meets Godzilla!” (Not a bad idea. Maybe Godzilla will eat them.)

If you are looking for a publisher and submit via the “Proposal and Sample Chapter” method, you want to keep your proposals relatively short. If you are already established at a publishing house, then you can probably make your proposals any length you want, depending on how easily your editor gets headaches.

Personally, I tend to go long on proposals. Whether this is a good thing or bad, I cannot tell you. I can tell you that you should ascertain whether your editor desires long proposals. Editors are the true godlike beings in the publishing business. They inhabit the ecological niche that we writers only wish we occupied. Editors have the power because it is they who have control over dispensing the money.

Since I am a science fiction writer, I usually start out by telling the editor what year it is and give them a bit of history to orient them to the story. Usually this “history lesson” runs approximately 5000 words before I get through filling in the background against which the story will be written. (Non-science fiction writers should be able to do it much shorter.) Then I introduce the characters and tell the story as quickly as I can without making it incomprehensible. Typically, this takes another 5000 words. When I am done, I have a basic roadmap to the plot, a map to which I can refer each time I “overrun my headlights.” After all, when working on a novel for a year or more, it is easy to forget exactly where you are headed on that vast grassy plain of possibilities.

The proposal doesn't give me the entire plot, of course. To do that would require that I write the book in advance of getting paid. Among the things missing from the proposal are the names and histories of the fifty or so supporting characters that will appear throughout the book. Nor have I figured out everyone's motivation. But at least I know what has to happen and when (mostly) in order for my plot to start at the edge of

the grasslands and, after wandering uncomfortably close to a number of snakes, lions, and wildfires, to eventually come upon the chest of gold as though by accident. In less flowery words, I have a bare bones plot, a framework onto which I can hang all of the detail that is so important in building a successful novel.

“But exactly how does one plot a story?” you ask in anguish.

A good question. Perhaps we should learn by doing...

In 1981, I set out to write a novel called *Thunderstrike!* in which a comet threatens the Earth. Finding the comet on a collision course with our lovely home world, Earth's government diverts the comet into the Moon, royally pissing off all the people who live there

So, as an exercise, let's go through the thought process I followed in plotting out *Thunderstrike!* That way you can see how it is done without having to translate everything using my “grassy savanna” mental picture. (Plotting *Thunderstrike!* required a couple of months of thinking and nearly a month of proposal writing to firm up the basic plot. After that, the novel took more than a year to write. *Thunderstrike!* is a long novel, tipping the scales at 134,000 words.)

Since I was going to have a comet threaten Earth, the first thing I did was read up on comets. It turns out that the Earth is a surprisingly difficult target to hit. At 12,700 kilometers (7,900 miles) in diameter, it's practically microscopic when one considers the 150 million kilometer (93 million mile) distance between the Earth and the sun. In fact, the Earth moves its own length every seven minutes as it orbits the sun, meaning that for a comet to hit the Earth requires it to arrive at precisely the right place and time. An error of one-hundredth of a degree in its path and it will miss.

Obviously, I needed to spend a great deal of effort in disguising this fact from the readers. Luckily I'm not alone in this. Have you ever noticed how many comets hit the Earth in literature compared to the number that hit in real life? This was where my research came in useful. Fully half of the known comets have orbital periods that are exact multiples of Jupiter's orbital period. What this means is that all of these comets have at one time or another encountered Jupiter out in the deep black.

So I added a Jupiter encounter to my plot. Initially the comet's orbit comes nowhere near Earth. Only after it passes close by Jupiter, causing its orbit to be substantially altered, does it make a beeline for the home world. This helped my plot greatly. Not only does a Jupiter-encounter give me a number of visually interesting scenes to write, it starts getting the readers used to the idea that comets are real objects, not merely lights in the sky.

What about characters? Well, since this is a previously unknown comet, I needed at least one character that was an astronomer. Why? In order for that character to discover the comet, of course. I could have made any character the astronomer, but I chose the heroine for that honor. Not only does it give her a history; it gives her a good reason to be on the expedition that will go out to meet the comet.

Giving your characters reasons to drop everything and run off on your adventure is often a bigger challenge than most writers acknowledge. Think of all the work C. S. Forester went to in order to get Lady Barbara Wellesley aboard *H.M.S. Lydia* in the first of the Horatio Hornblower books. Or if you are partial to old western movies, consider John Ford's *The Horse Soldiers*, about a Union Army raid deep into the Confederacy

during the U.S. Civil War. The plot requires the beautiful heroine (played by Constance Towers) to accompany the Union cavalry (commanded by John Wayne) through most of the movie. The method by which Ford makes this highly unlikely scenario believable is ingenious.

Both Forester and Ford had similar plot problems. They needed to plausibly put beautiful women into situations that are normally all male in real life in order to give the heroes a love interest. I didn't have that problem in *Thunderstrike!* since my comet expedition was going to have a mixed crew anyway. I just had to give my heroine a convincing reason for totally disrupting her life and going out to see the comet first hand.

Which brings us to one of the biggest problems I faced. I was writing a book in which a comet sweeps in from the depths of outer space, slingshots around Jupiter, dives into the inner Solar system, rounds the sun, and then makes a beeline directly for the Earth. When humanity finally manages to divert it after several unsuccessful attempts, they cause it to crash down on the backside of the Moon, almost directly on top of the heroine's observatory. The final crash of the comet into the Moon is the climax of the book and it is a spectacular scene. But to write it, I needed the characters to be close enough to the explosion to view it in all of its glory, but not so close that they are instantly killed in the blast.

Yet, what idiot would stick around to see the comet hit? Anyone with common sense would be long gone by the time the comet arrived, wouldn't they? Since I wanted my hero and heroine to witness the blast, I needed some reason why they would stay on the Moon long enough to be endangered by the comet's arrival. Making the heroine an astronomer solved my problem. I decided that when the time came, she and the hero would work feverishly to salvage the Solar System's most advanced telescope. In the end, they would find that they had stayed too long and were trapped on the Moon with death rushing at them from out of the sky. Having trapped them, I was able to set up a climax that followed the protagonists as they worked feverishly to escape their fate. Eventually they do so, of course, but just barely. They climb into the pod of an electromagnetic accelerator and fling themselves away from the moon in the nick of time. This way they have a ringside seat to the comet's impact.

But how am I to convince the readers that these people would risk their lives for a telescope? Simple. I wrote the telescope into the first scene of the novel. Once introduced, I let it lie in the back of the readers' minds until it is time to resurrect it for the climax. Hopefully by the time I need it again, the reader is thoroughly indoctrinated in the idea that the telescope is invaluable to science.

[I am particularly proud of the scene where *Thunderstrike*, the comet, smashes into the Moon. If you haven't read it – and to judge by the novel's sales, the vast majority of you haven't – I have included an excerpt following this article.]

So where are we in plotting this book? We have our problem: the comet. We have our heroine, the astronomer, and we even have our first scene, the introduction of the heroine and the telescope that will figure so prominently in the climax.

Now we need a hero and a reason for someone to pay for the expedition that will go out to meet the comet at Jupiter. Once again, character motivation showed me the direction the plot needed to go. Rather than send the expedition out for purely scientific purposes (which I considered to be hokey and unbelievable), I decided it would be

sponsored by an industrial tycoon, the Bill Gates of his era. Nor is the tycoon interested in the comet for its own sake. He's sending the expedition to buoy up the price of his corporation's stock in the stock market. If you want to know what comets have to do with stock prices, you'll have to read the book. The hero, then, is an employee of the tycoon's mega-corporation. His motivation is simple. The boss orders him to go.

At this point I decided to start a little political turmoil between the governments of Earth and the Moon. The Lunar government dislikes Earth because the home world is so much bigger than they are (kind of the way we inhabitants of the western U.S. feel about New York). This political intrigue, which manifests itself early in the book in squabbling over who owns the comet, blossoms into a big problem as the time to divert the comet into the Moon draws near.

I could go on describing how I plotted *Thunderstrike!* for another 10,000 words or so, but I fear many of you are probably getting a little glassy eyed at all of this detail, so I'll stop. The point of this exercise was to show you the thought processes that go along with plotting a novel. You start with the basic problem, work things out logically, throw in some interesting characters, stir to a boil, and then serve hot! In other words, just keep asking yourself what comes next, and whether anyone really cares or not. It's amazing how much detail you can pack into a book when you spend a year or more writing it.

And, oh yes, there is one more thing you should remember. If you haven't got a plot, you haven't got a story. So don't shortchange the plotting process. No matter how long it takes to work out these small details, you will find that your work is much better for having done it.

Who knows, you just may write a masterpiece!

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The End

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Appendix
Excerpt from Thunderstrike!

"How long until impact?"

Amber glanced at her suit chronometer. "Three minutes."

"Check your polarizers," Thorpe ordered.

Each of them chinned the helmet control that caused their faceplates to darken. From inside the dark bubble, Thorpe could barely make out the Moon's outline. He chinned again to relieve the darkness, then watched as each of the others' helmets cleared one by one.

"Amber, please instruct us in proper procedure."

She nodded inside her helmet. "We go to dark one minute prior to impact. At T minus fifteen seconds, squint until you can barely see your helmet instruments. In any event, do not look directly at the Moon. And for God's sake, if your eyes start to ache, close them fully until the flash has passed. Pain is your body's way of sending you a message."

"Everyone got that?"

They each acknowledged on the common circuit. Before he knew it, Amber announced that the time to impact was down to a single minute. Thorpe waited until the other helmets had turned glossy black before once again chinning his polarizer. At fifteen seconds, he squinted as instructed.

Amber's voice continued the countdown. As she reached zero, the interior of his helmet turned violet despite the polarizer. He'd planned to watch the whole thing, but the daggers stabbing deeply into his retinas caused him to wince. It was worse than the time he'd been caught by sunrise on the monorail. He turned away and screwed his eyelids tightly shut. It helped a little. After a dozen seconds the glow began to fade. After a minute, he was able to open his eyes and turn back to gaze at the Moon. The glow was still uncomfortably bright, but tolerable. For the first time he caught sight of Luna.

He gasped.

A fireball was trying to dig its way into Luna's heart. The outer edge of the expanding zone of destruction was defined by a spherical shockwave. The shockwave was a transparent bubble that was already several times Luna's diameter. Below it was another shell of destruction. This one glowed incandescent, and had shaded down from violet to blue-white. This, Thorpe knew from reading the scientific projections of the impact, consisted of millions of tons of the lunar crust and cometary iron that had been vaporized by the impact. The glowing gas was racing outward from ground zero. Soon it would cool and start to condense into molten rock and iron. It would be from this shell that billions of micrometeoroids would form. They would provide Earth with spectacular meteor showers for several centuries to come.

Behind the incandescent gas shell was a layer of solid material from the periphery of the impact crater. It had been thrown outward in the crown shaped splash that is characteristic of impact craters. This third layer was the dangerous one. Some of its individual pieces were the size of small mountains, and all were speeding away at greater

than lunar escape velocity. Finally, at the center of the expanding cloud of debris was a vast inferno of violet-white heat still too bright to look at directly.

As Thorpe slowly reduced the degree of polarization in his faceplate, other details began to appear. A moving line of dust was working its way across the Farside highlands near the Moon's eastern limb. As he watched, other dust lines appeared at both poles and began marching toward the equator. Even though he couldn't see it, he knew that such a line was also marching westward, and that all would converge at a point diametrically opposite from where the comet nucleus had struck.

The line of dust was caused by the moving ground shock. As it moved through Luna's interior at the speed of sound, the surface wave produced a moving moonquake. As the quake passed, it tossed grains of dust and even small boulders high into the sky. Behind the dust, vast chasms of red appeared as the ancient surface split open under the stress. For the first time in four billion years, molten lava flowed again on Luna.

The marching wavefronts converged at the end of ten minutes, leaving the Lunar surface a raw red scar. All across Nearside, the mares were once again seas of liquid rock. Thorpe's gaze was drawn to where the Tranquility Monument had been. It was now an unbroken red-orange glow. No longer were the boot prints of two intrepid astronauts imbedded forever in the soft gray soil. In just a few minutes, Thunderstrike had wiped clean any sign that humanity had ever visited its nearest neighbor in space.

Luna's normally sharp features suddenly began to soften, as though seen through haze. Thorpe blinked, thinking his own tears were clouding his vision. It took a few moments to realize that the effect had nothing to do with his eyes. It was very real and entirely external.

"What's happening?" he yelled into his radio. Up until that moment, no one had said a word. Each had watched the cataclysm wrapped in their own cocoon of thoughts.

"It's the water vapor from Thunderstrike," Amber replied, her voice as excited as his own. "The Moon is being engulfed in a vast cloud of steam. It should begin to rain there any minute!"

As though to underscore her words, the canister was buffeted as though by high winds. The viewport suddenly dulled as it was coated with a thin film of frost. Moments later, the interior clattered as their craft's hull was scoured by unseen particles. Several tiny pits appeared in the transparent surface of the viewport.

Amber pointed to the haze on the port's exterior. "Ice! We've entered the debris cloud! It won't be long until the next phase."

"Next phase?" Jamie Bryant asked, turning from the port to look at Amber. Thorpe did the same. For the first time he noticed that she was very pale behind her faceplate. The spectacle of Luna's destruction had excited her. That had been evident just a few seconds earlier. Now that excitement had turned to fear.

"What's the matter?"

"We've been overtaken by the outermost debris layer," she explained. "It's mostly microscopic ice particles, so there's not much to worry about. Pretty soon, though, we'll be engulfed by the large stuff. This light snowstorm is about to turn into a blizzard of rocks. If we survive that, we may get through this alive."

Thorpe frowned. "When will we know?"

"Eight hours."

"So if we're alive in eight hours, we're liable to stay that way?"

"Correct."

"Then I guess we wait and trust our luck," Thorpe said. He reached out and took her hand. "Scared?"

"You're damned right I am!"

"Me, too. Whatever happens, we'll meet it together..."

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The End

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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\$4.50

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\$7.00

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\$6.00

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\$4.50

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\$4.50

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 — \$6.00

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 — \$7.00

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. Gridlock and Other Stories - US\$4.50

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

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

Have you missed any of the articles in the Art of Writing Series? No problem. The first sixteen articles (October, 1996-December, 1997) have been collected into a book-length work of more than 72,000 words. Now you can learn about character, conflict, plot, pacing, dialogue, and the business of writing, all in one document.

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

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.

14. The Art of Science Fiction, Volume I - US\$10.00

Have you missed any of the articles in the Art of Science Fiction Series? No problem. The first sixteen articles (October, 1996-December, 1997) have been collected into a book-length work of more than 70,000 words. Learn about science fiction techniques and technologies, including starships, time machines, and rocket propulsion. Tour the Solar System and learn astronomy from the science fiction writer's viewpoint. We don't care where the stars appear in the terrestrial sky. We want to know their true positions in space. If you are planning to write an interstellar romance, brushing up on your astronomy may be just what you need.

15. 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.

16. 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.