Alfred Bester:

my affair with science fiction

I'm told that some science fiction readers complain that nothing is known about my private life. It's not that I have anything to conceal; it's simply the result of the fact that I'm reluctant to talk about myself because I prefer to listen to others talk about themselves. I'm genuinely interested, and also there's always the chance of picking up something useful. The professional writer is a professional magpie.

Very briefly: I was born on Manhattan Island 18 December 1913, of a middle-class, hard-working family. I was born a Jew but the family had a *laisser faire* attitude toward religion and let me pick my own faith for myself. I picked Natural Law. My father was raised in Chicago, always a raunchy town with no time for the God bit. Neither had he. My mother is a quiet Christian Scientist. When I do something that pleases her she nods and says, 'Yes, of course. You were born in Science'. I used to make fun of her belief as a kid and we had some delightful arguments. We still do, while my father sits and smiles benignly. So my homelife was completely liberal and iconoclastic.

I went to the last Little Red Schoolhouse in Manhattan (now preserved as a landmark) and to a beautiful new high

school on the very peak of Washington Heights (now the scene of cruel racial conflicts). I went to the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia where I made a fool of myself trying to become a Renaissance man. I refused to specialize and knocked myself out studying the humanities and the scientific disciplines. I was a maladroit on the crew and football squads, but I was the most successful member of the fencing team.

I'd been fascinated by science fiction ever since Hugo Gernsback's magazines first appeared on the stands. I suffered through the dismal years of space opera when science fiction was written by the hacks of pulp Westerns who merely translated the Lazy X ranch into the Planet X and then wrote the same formula stories, using space pirates instead of cattle rustlers. I welcomed the glorious epiphany of John Campbell whose *Astounding* brought about the Golden Age of science fiction.

Ah! Science fiction, science fiction! I've loved it since its birth. I've read it all my life, off and on, with excitement, with joy, sometimes with sorrow. Here's a twelve-year-old kid, hungry for ideas and imagination, borrowing fairy tale collections from the library – *The Blue Fairy Book, The Red Fairy Book, The Paisley Fairy Book* – and smuggling them home under his jacket because he was ashamed to be reading fairy tales at his age. And then came Hugo Gernsback.

I read science fiction piecemeal in those days. I didn't have much allowance so I couldn't afford to buy the magazines. I would loaf at the newsstand outside the stationery store as though contemplating which magazine to buy. I would leaf through a science fiction magazine, reading rapidly, until the proprietor came out and chased me. A few hours later I'd return and continue where I'd been forced to leave off. There was one hateful kid in summer camp who used to receive the *Amazing Quarterly* in July. I was next in line and he was hateful because he was a slow reader.

It's curious that I remember very few of the stories. The H. G. Wells reprints, to be sure, and the very first book I ever bought was the collection of Wells' science fiction short stories. I remember 'The Captured Cross Section' which flabbergasted me with its arresting concept. I think I first read

'Flatland by A. Square' as an *Amazing* reprint. I remember a cover for a novel titled, I think, *The Second Deluge*. It showed the survivors of the deluge in a sort of second ark gazing in awe at the peak of Mt Everest now bared naked by the rains. The peak was a glitter of precious gems. I interviewed Sir Edmund Hillary in New Zealand a few years ago and he never said anything about diamonds and emeralds. That gives one furiously to think.

Through high school and college I continued to read science fiction but, as I said, with increasing frustration. The pulp era had set in and most of the stories were about heroes with names like 'Brick Malloy' who were inspired to combat space pirates, invaders from other worlds, giant insects and all the rest of the trash still being produced by Hollywood today. I remember a perfectly appalling novel about a Negro conspiracy to take over the world. These niggers, you see, had invented a serum which turned them white, so they could pass, and they were boring from within. Brick Malloy took care of those black bastards. We've come a long way, haven't we?

There were a few bright moments. Who can forget the impact of Weinbaum's 'A Martian Odyssey'? That unique story inspired an entire vogue for quaint alien creatures in science fiction. 'A Martian Odyssey' was one reason why I submitted my first story to Standard Magazines; they had published Weinbaum's classic. Alas, Weinbaum fell apart and degenerated into a second-rate fantasy writer, and died too young to fulfill his original promise.

And then came Campbell who rescued, elevated, gave meaning and importance to science fiction. It became a vehicle for ideas, daring, audacity. Why, in God's name, didn't he come first? Even today science fiction is still struggling to shake off its pulp reputation, deserved in the past but certainly not now. It reminds me of the exploded telegony theory; that once a thoroughbred mare has borne a colt by a non-thoroughbred sire she can never bear another thoroughbred again. Science fiction is still suffering from telegony.

Those happy golden days! I used to go to secondhand magazine stores and buy back copies of *Astounding*. I

remember a hot July weekend when my wife was away working in a summer stock company and I spent two days thrilling to 'Slan' And Heinlein's 'Universe'! What a concept, and so splendidly worked out with imagination and remorseless logic! Do you remember 'The Destroyer'? Do you remember Lewis Padgett's 'Mimsy Were The Borogroves'? That was originality carried to the fifth power. Do you remember . . . But it's no use. I could go on and on. The *Blue*, the *Red* and the *Paisley Fairy Books* were gone forever.

After I graduated from the university I really didn't know what I wanted to do with myself. In retrospect I realize that what I needed was a *Wanderjahr*, but such a thing was unheard of in the States at that time. I went to law school for a couple of years, just stalling, and to my surprise received a concentrated education which far surpassed that of my undergraduate years. After thrashing and loafing, to the intense pain of my parents who would have liked to see me settled in a career, I finally took a crack at writing a science fiction story which I submitted to Standard Magazines. The story had the ridiculous title of 'Diaz-X'.

Two editors on the staff, Mort Weisinger and Jack Schiff, took an interest in me, I suspect mostly because I'd just finished reading and annotating Joyce's *Ulysses* and would preach it enthusiastically without provocation, to their great amusement. They told me what they had in mind. *Thrilling Wonder* was conducting a prize contest for the best story written by an amateur, and so far none of the submissions was worth considering. They thought 'Diaz-X' might fill the bill if it was whipped into shape. They taught me how to revise the story into acceptable form and gave it the prize, $50. It was printed with the title, 'The Broken Axiom'. They continued their professional guidance and I've never stopped being grateful to them.

I think I wrote perhaps a dozen acceptable science fiction stories in the next two years, all of them rotten, but I was without craft and experience and had to learn by trial and error. I've never been one to save things, I don't even save my mss, but I did hold on to the first four magazine covers on which my name appeared. *Thrilling Wonder Stories* (15¢). On the lower left hand corner is printed 'Slaves of the Life

Ray, a startling novelet by Alfred Bester'. The feature story was 'Trouble on Titan, A Gerry Carlyle Novel by Arthur K. Barnes'. Another issue had me down in the same bullpen, 'The Voyage to Nowhere by Alfred Bester'. The most delightful item is my first cover story in *Astonishing Stories* (10¢). 'The Pet Nebula by Alfred Bester'. The cover shows an astonished young scientist in his laboratory being confronted by a sort of gigantic, radioactive seahorse. Damned if I can remember what the story was about.

Some other authors on the covers were: Neil R. Jones, J. Harvey Haggard, Ray Cummings (I remember that name), Harry Bates (his too), Kelvin Kent (sounds like a house name to me), E. E. Smith, Ph.D. (but of course), and Henry Kuttner with better billing than mine. He was in the lefthand *upper* corner.

Mort Weisinger introduced me to the informal luncheon gatherings of the working science fiction authors of the late thirties. I met Henry Kuttner (who later became Lewis Padgett), Ed Hamilton, and Otto Binder, the writing half of Eando Binder. Eando was a sort of acronym of the brothers Earl and Otto Binder. E. and O. Earl died but Otto continued to use the well-known *nom de plume*. Malcolm Jameson, author of navy-orientated space stories, was there, tall, gaunt, prematurely grey, speaking in slow, heavy tones. Now and then he brought along his pretty daughter who turned everybody's head.

The vivacious compère of those luncheons was Manley Wade Wellman, a professional Southerner full of regional anecdotes. It's my recollection that one of his hands was slightly shrivelled, which may have been why he came on so strong for the Confederate cause. We were all very patient with that; after all, our side won the war. Wellman was quite the man-of-the-world for the innocent thirties; he always ordered wine with his lunch.

Henry Kuttner and Otto Binder were medium sized young men, very quiet and courteous, and entirely without outstanding features. Once I broke Kuttner up quite unintentionally. I said to Weisinger, 'I've just finished a wild story that takes place in a spaceless, timeless locale where

there's no objective reality. It's awfully long, 20,000 words, but I can cut the first 5,000.' Kuttner burst out laughing. I do too when I think of the dumb kid I was. Once I said most earnestly to Jameson, 'I've discovered a remarkable thing. If you combine two story-lines into one the result can be tremendously exciting.' He stared at me with incredulity. 'Haven't you ever heard of plot and counterplot?' he growled. I hadn't. I discovered it all by myself.

Being brash and the worst kind of intellectual snob, I said privately to Weisinger that I wasn't much impressed by these writers who were supplying most of the science fiction for the magazines, and asked him why they received so many assignments. He explained, 'They may never write a great story but they never write a bad one. We know we can depend on them.' Having recently served my time as a magazine editor I now understand exactly what he meant.

When the comic book explosion burst, my two magi were lured away from Standard Magazines by the Superman Group. There was a desperate need for writers to provide scenarios (Wellman nicknamed them 'squinkas') for the artists, so Weisinger and Schiff drafted me as one of their writers. I hadn't the faintest idea of how to write a comic book script, but one rainy Saturday afternoon Bill Finger, the star comics writer of the time, took me in hand and gave me, a potential rival, an incisive, illuminating lecture on the craft. I still regard that as a high point in the generosity of one colleague to another.

I wrote comics for three or four years with increasing expertise and success. Those were wonderful days for a novice. Squinkas were expanding, there was a constant demand for stories, you could write three and four a week and experiment while learning your craft. The scripts were usually an odd combination of science fiction and 'Gangbusters'. To give you some idea of what they were like, here's a typical script conference with an editor I'll call Chuck Migg, dealing with a feature I'll call 'Captain Hero'. Naturally, both are fictitious. The dialogue isn't.

'Now listen,' Migg says, 'I called you down because we got to do something about Captain Hero.'

'What's your problem?'

'The book is closing next week and we're thirteen pages short. That's a whole lead story. We got to work one out now.'

'Any particular slant?'

'Nothing special, except maybe two things. We got to be original and we got to be realistic. No more fantasy.'

'Right.'

'So give.'

'Wait a minute, for Christ's sake. Who d'you think I am, Saroyan?'

Two minutes of intense concentration, then Migg says, 'How about this? A mad scientist invents a machine for making people go fast. So crooks steal it and hop themselves up. Get it? They move so fast they can rob a bank in a split second.'

'No.'

'We open a splash panel showing money and jewellery disappearing with wiggly lines and – Why no?'

'It's a steal from H. G. Wells.'

'But it's still original.'

'Anyway, it's too fantastic. I thought you said we were going to be realistic.'

'Sure I said realistic but that don't mean we can't be imaginative. What we have to – '

'Wait a minute. Hold the phone.'

'Got a flash?'

'Maybe. Suppose we begin with a guy making some kind of experiment. He's a scientist but not mad. This is a straight, sincere guy.'

'Gotcha. He's making an experiment for the good of humanity. Different narrative hook.'

'We'll have to use some kind of rare earth metal; cerium, maybe, or – '

'No, let's go back to radium. We ain't used it in the last three issues.'

'All right, radium. The experiment is a success. He brings a dead dog back to life with his radium serum.'

'I'm waiting for the twist.'

'The serum gets into his blood. From a lovable scientist he turns into a fiend.'

At this point Migg takes fire. 'I got it! I got it! We'll make like King Midas. This doc is a sweet guy. He's just finished an experiment that's gonna bring eternal life to mankind. So he takes a walk in his garden and smells a rose. Blooie! The rose dies. He feeds the birds. Wham! The birds plotz. So how does Captain Hero come in?'

'Well, maybe we can make it Jekyll and Hyde here. The doctor doesn't want to be a walking killer. He knows there's a rare medicine that'll neutralize the radium in him. He has to steal it from hospitals and that brings Captain Hero around to investigate.'

'Nice human interest.'

'But here's the next twist. The doctor takes a shot of the medicine and thinks he's safe. Then his daughter walks into the lab and when he kisses her she dies. The medicine won't cure him any more.'

By now Migg is in orbit. 'I got it! I got it! First we run a caption: IN THE LONELY LABORATORY A DREADFUL CHANGE TORTURES DR – whatever his name is – HE IS NOW DR RADIUM!!! Nice name, huh?'

'Okay.'

'Then we run a few panels showing him turning green and smashing stuff and he screams: THE MEDICINE CAN NO LONGER SAVE ME! THE RADIUM IS EATING INTO MY BRAIN!! I'M GOING MAD, HA-HA-HA!!! How's that for real drama?'

'Great.'

'Okay. That takes care of the first three pages. What happens with Dr Radium in the next ten?'

'Straight action finish. Captain Hero tracks him down. He traps Captain Hero in something lethal. Captain Hero escapes and traps Dr Radium and knocks him off a cliff or something.'

'No. Knock him into a volcano.'

'Why?'

'So we can bring Dr Radium back for a sequel. He really packs a wallop. We could have him walking through walls and stuff on account of the radium in him.'

'Sure.'

'This is gonna be a great character, so don't rush the writing. Can you start today? Good. I'll send a messenger up for it tomorrow.'

The great George Burns, bemoaning the death of vaudeville, once said 'there just ain't no place for kids to be lousy any more'. The comics gave me an ample opportunity to get a lot of lousy writing out of my system.

The line '... knocks him off a cliff or something' has particular significance. We had very strict self-imposed rules about death and violence. The Good Guys never deliberately killed. They fought, but only with their fists. Only villains used deadly weapons. We could show death coming – a character falling off the top of a high building *Aigggghhh!* – and we could show the result of death – a body, but always face down. We could never show the moment of death; never a wound, never a rictus, no blood, at the most a knife protruding from the back. I remember the shock that ran through the *Superman* office when Chet Gould drew a bullet piercing the forehead of a villain in a *Dick Tracy*.

We had other strict rules. No cop could be crooked. They could be dumb but they had to be honest. We disapproved of Raymond Chandler's corrupt police. No mechanical or scientific device could be used unless it had a firm foundation in fact. We used to laugh at the outlandish gadgets Bob Kane invented (he wrote his own squinkas as a rule) for *Batman and Robin* which, among ourselves, we called Batman and Rabinowitz. Sadism was absolutely taboo; no torture scenes, no pain scenes. And, of course, sex was completely out.

Holiday tells a great story about George Horace Lorrimer, the awesome editor-in-chief of the *Saturday Evening Post*, our sister magazine. He did a very daring thing for his time. He ran a novel in two parts and the first installment ended with the girl bringing the boy back to her apartment at midnight for coffee and eggs. The second installment opened with them having breakfast together in her apartment the following morning. Thousands of indignant letters came in and Lorrimer had a form reply printed 'the *Saturday Even-*

ing Post is not responsible for the behaviour of its characters between installments.' Presumably our comic book heroes lived normal lives between issues; Batman getting bombed and chasing ladies into bed, Rabinowitz burning down his school library in protest against something.

I was married by then and my wife was an actress. One day she told me that the radio show, *Nick Carter*, was looking for scripts. I took one of my best comic book stories, translated it into a radio script and it was accepted. Then my wife told me that a new show, *Charlie Chan*, was having script problems. I did the same thing with the same result. By the end of the year I was the regular writer on those two shows and branching out to *The Shadow* and others. The comic book days were over, but the splendid training I received in visualization, attack, dialogue and economy stayed with me forever. The imagination must come from within; no one can teach you that. The ideas must come from without, and I'd better explain that.

Usually, ideas don't just come to you out of nowhere; they require a compost heap for germination, and the compost is diligent preparation. I spent many hours a week in the reading rooms of the New York public library at 42nd Street and Fifth Avenue. I read everything and anything with magpie attention for a possible story idea; art frauds, police methods, smuggling, psychiatry, scientific research, colour dictionaries, music, demography, biography, plays ... the list is endless. I'd been forced to develop a speed-reading technique in law school and averaged a dozen books per session. I thought that one potential idea per book was a reasonable return. All that material went into my Commonplace Book for future use. I'm still using it and still adding to it.

And so for the next five or six years I forgot comics, forgot science fiction and immersed myself in the entertainment business. It was new, colourful, challenging and – I must be honest – far more profitable. I wrote mystery, adventure, fantasy, variety, anything that was a challenge, a new experience, something I'd never done before. I even became the

director on one of the shows, and that was another fascinating challenge.

I did write one straight science fiction show. It was called, I think, *Tom Corbett, Space Cadet*. It was a very low budget show and most of the action was played in bookfold sets. Even the doors weren't practical, they were painted and you had to dissolve before a character made his exit. I quit for an amusing reason. In those early days of tv there wasn't any standard form for typing scripts; each show had its own particular requirements. *Corbett*, for reasons which I never could understand, insisted that all stage directions be typed in lower case and all dialogue in caps:

(Corbett enters office)

CORBETT: YOU WANTED TO SEE ME, SIR?

CAPTAIN: YES. AT EASE, CORBETT. SIT DOWN.

(Corbett sits)

CAPTAIN: WHAT I'M GOING TO TELL YOU IS TOP SECRET.

CORBETT: SIR?

CAPTAIN: IT'S MUTINY.

CORBETT: (Leaping up in consternation) NO!

CAPTAIN: (Quietly) KEEP YOUR VOICE DOWN.

I just couldn't stand the characters continually shouting at each other.

Eventually a very slow and insidious poison began to diminish my pleasure; it was the constraints of network censorship and client control. There were too many ideas which I was not permitted to explore. Management said they were too different, the public would never understand them. Accounting said they were too expensive to do, the budget couldn't stand it. One Chicago client wrote an angry letter to the producer of one of my shows – 'Tell Bester to stop trying to be original. All I want is ordinary scripts'. That really hurt. Originality is the essence of what the artist has to offer. One way or another we must produce a new sound.

But I must admit that the originality compulsion can often be a nuisance to myself as well as others. When a concept for a story develops, a half-dozen ideas for the working-out come to mind. These are explored and dismissed. If they came that easily they can't be worthwhile. 'Do it the hard

way,' I say to myself, and so I search for the hard way, driving myself and everybody around me quite mad in the process. I pace interminably, mumbling to myself. I go for long walks. I sit in bars and drink, hoping that an overheard fragment of conversation may give me a clue. It never happens but all the same, for reasons which I don't understand, I do get ideas in saloons.

Here's an example. Recently I was struggling with the pheromone phenomenon. A pheromone is an external hormone secreted by an insect, an ant, say, when it finds a food source. The other members of the colony are impelled to follow the pheromone trail, and they find the food, too. I wanted to extrapolate that to a man and I had to do it the hard way. So I paced and I walked and at last I went to a bar where I was nailed by a dumb announcer I knew who drilled my ear with his boring monologue. As I was gazing moodily into my drink and wondering how to escape, the hard way came to me. 'He doesn't *leave* a trail,' I burst out. 'He's impelled to *follow* a trail.' While the announcer looked at me in astonishment I whipped out my notebook and wrote 'Death left a pheromone trail for him; death in fact, death in the making, death in the planning.'

So, out of frustration, I went back to science fiction in order to keep my cool. It was a safety valve, an escape hatch, therapy for me. The ideas which no show would touch could be written as science fiction stories and I could have the satisfaction of seeing them come to life. (You must have an audience for that.) I wrote perhaps a dozen and a half stories, most of them for *Fantasy & Science Fiction* whose editors, Tony Boucher and Mick McComas, were unfailingly kind and appreciative.

I wrote a few stories for *Astounding*, and out of that came my one demented meeting with the great John W. Campbell, Jr. I needn't preface this account with the reminder that I worshipped Campbell from afar. I had never met him; all my stories had been submitted by mail. I hadn't the faintest idea of what he was like, but I imagined that he was a combination of Bertrand Russell and Ernest Rutherford. So I sent off another story to Campbell, one which no show would let me tackle. The title was 'Oddy and Id' and the concept was

Freudian, that a man is not governed by his conscious mind but rather by his unconscious compulsions. Campbell telephoned me a week later to say that he liked the story but wanted to discuss a few changes with me. Would I come to his office? I was delighted to accept the invitation despite the fact that the editorial offices of *Astounding* were then the hell and gone out in the boondocks of New Jersey.

The editorial offices were in a grim factory that looked like and probably was a printing plant. The 'offices' turned out to be one small office, cramped, dingy, occupied not only by Campbell but by his assistant, Miss Tarrant. My only yardstick for comparison was the glamourous network and advertising agency offices. I was dismayed.

Campbell arose from his desk and shook hands. I'm a fairly big guy but he looked enormous to me, about the size of a defensive tackle. He was dour and seemed preoccupied by matters of great moment. He sat down behind his desk. I sat down on the visitor's chair.

'You don't know it,' Campbell said, 'you can't have any way of knowing it, but Freud is finished.'

I stared. 'If you mean the rival schools of psychiatry, Mr Campbell, I think – '

'No I don't. Psychiatry, as we know it, is dead.'

'Oh come now, Mr Campbell. Surely you're joking.'

'I have never been more serious in my life. Freud has been destroyed by one of the greatest discoveries of our time.'

'What's that?'

'Dianetics.'

'I never heard of it.'

'It was discovered by L. Ron Hubbard, and he will win the Nobel peace prize for it,' Campbell said solemnly.

'The peace prize? What for?'

'Wouldn't the man who wiped out war win the Nobel peace prize?'

'I suppose so, but how?'

'Through dianetics.'

'I honestly don't know what you're talking about, Mr Campbell.'

'Read this,' he said, and handed me a sheaf of long galley proofs. They were, I discovered later, the galleys of the very first dianetics piece to appear in *Astounding*.

'Read them here and now? This is an awful lot of copy.'

He nodded, shuffled some papers, spoke to Miss Tarrant and went about his business, ignoring me. I read the first galley carefully, the second not so carefully as I became bored by the dianetics mishmash. Finally I was just letting my eyes wander along, but was very careful to allow enough time for each galley so Campbell wouldn't know I was faking. He looked very shrewd and observant to me. After a sufficient time I stacked the galleys neatly and returned them to Campbell's desk.

'Well?' he demanded. 'Will Hubbard win the peace prize?'

'It's difficult to say. Dianetics is a most original and imaginative idea, but I've only been able to read through the piece once. If I could take a set of galleys home and – '

'No,' Campbell said. 'There's only this one set. I'm re-scheduling and pushing the article into the very next issue. It's that important.' He handed the galleys to Miss Tarrant. 'You're blocking it,' he told me. 'That's all right. Most people do that when a new idea threatens to overturn their thinking.'

'That may well be,' I said, 'but I don't think it's true of myself. I'm a hyperthyroid, an intellectual monkey, curious about everything.'

'No,' Campbell said, with the assurance of a diagnostician, 'You're a hyp-O-thyroid. But it's not a question of intellect, it's one of emotion. We conceal our emotional history from ourselves although dianetics can trace our history all the way back to the womb.'

'To the womb!'

'Yes. The foetus remembers. Come and have lunch.'

Remember, I was fresh from Madison Avenue and expense-account luncheons. We didn't go to the Jersey equivalent of Sardi's, '21', or even P. J. Clark's. He led me downstairs and we entered a tacky little lunchroom crowded with printers and file clerks; an interior room with blank walls that made every sound reverberate. I got myself a liverwurst on white,

no mustard, and a coke. I can't remember what Campbell ate.

We sat down at a small table while he continued to discourse on dianetics, the great salvation of the future when the world would at last be cleared of its emotional wounds. Suddenly he stood up and towered over me. 'You can drive your memory back to the womb,' he said. 'You can do it if you release every block, clear yourself and remember. Try it.'

'Now?'

'Now. Think. Think back. Clear yourself. Remember! You can remember when your mother tried to abort you with a button hook. You've never stopped hating her for it.'

Around me there were cries of 'BLT down, hold the mayo. Eighty-six on the English. Combo rye, relish. Coffee shake, pick up.' And here was this grim tackle standing over me, practising dianetics without a licence. The scene was so lunatic that I began to tremble with suppressed laughter. I prayed. 'Help me out of this, please. Don't let me laugh in his face. Show me a way out.' God showed me. I looked up at Campbell and said, 'You're absolutely right, Mr Campbell, but the emotional wounds are too much to bear. I can't go on with this.'

He was completely satisfied. 'Yes, I could see you were shaking.' He sat down again and we finished our lunch and returned to his office. It developed that the only changes he wanted in my story was the removal of all Freudian terms which dianetics had now made obsolete. I agreed, of course; they were minor and it was a great honour to appear in *Astounding* no matter what the price. I escaped at last and returned to civilization where I had three double gibsons and don't be stingy with the onions.

That was my one and only meeting with John Campbell and certainly my only story conference with him. I've had some wild ones in the entertainment business but nothing to equal that. It reinforced my private opinion that a majority of the science fiction crowd, despite their brilliance, were missing their marbles. Perhaps that's the price that must be paid for brilliance.

One day, out of the clear sky, Horace Gold telephoned to ask me to write for *Galaxy* which he had launched with tremendous success. It filled an open space in the field; *Astounding* was hard science, *Fantasy & Science Fiction* was wit and sophistication, *Galaxy* was psychiatry-orientated. I was flattered but begged off, explaining that I didn't think I was much of a science fiction author compared to the genuine greats.

'Why me?' I asked, 'you can have Sturgeon, Kornbluth, Asimov, Heinlein.'

'I've got them,' he said, 'and I want you.'

'Horace, you're an old script writer so you'll understand. I'm tied up with a bitch of a tv show starring a no-talent. I've got to write continuity for him, quiz sections for him to emcee and dramatic sketches for him to mutilate. He's driving me up the wall. His agent is driving me up the wall. I really haven't got the time.'

Horace didn't give up. He would call every so often to chat about the latest science fiction, new concepts, what authors had failed and how they'd failed. In the course of these gossips he contrived to argue that I was a better writer than I thought and to ask if I didn't have any ideas that I might be interested in working out.

All this was on the phone because Horace was trapped in his apartment. He'd had shattering experiences in both the European and Pacific Theatres during World War II and had been released from the service with complete agoraphobia. Everybody had to come to his apartment to see him, including his psychiatrist. Horace was most entertaining on the phone; witty, ironic, perceptive, making shrewd criticisms of science fiction.

I enjoyed these professional gossips with Horace so much that I began to feel beholden to him; after all, I was more or less trapped in my workshop, too. At last I submitted perhaps a dozen ideas for his judgment. Horace discussed them all, very sensibly and realistically, and suggested combining two different ideas into what ultimately became *The Demolished Man.* I remember one of the ideas only vaguely; it had something to do with extra sensory perception but I've

forgotten the gimmick. The other I remember quite well. I wanted to write a mystery about a future in which the police are armed with time machines so that if a crime is committed they could trace it back to its origin. This would make crime impossible. How then, in an open story, could a clever criminal outwit the police?

I'd better explain 'open story'. The classic mystery is the closed story or whodunnit. It's a puzzle in which everything is concealed except the clues carefully scattered through the story. It's up to the audience to piece them together and solve the puzzle. I had become quite expert at that. However, I was carrying too many mystery shows and often fell behind in my deadlines, a heinous crime, so occasionally I would commit the lesser crime of stealing one of my scripts from Show A and adapting it for Show B.

I was reading a three-year-old Show A script for possible theft when it dawned on me that I had written all the wrong scenes. It was a solid story but in the attempt to keep it a closed puzzle I had been forced to omit the real drama in order to present the perplexing results of the behind-the-scenes action. So I developed for myself a style of action-mystery writing in which everything is open and known to the audience, every move and counter-move, with only the final resolution coming as a surprise. The technique is a commonplace today. This is an extremely difficult form of writing; it requires you to make your antagonists outwit each other continually with ingenuity and resourcefulness.

Horace suggested that instead of using time machines as the obstacle for the criminal I use ESP. Time travel, he said, was a pretty worn out theme, and I had to agree. ESP, Horace said, would be an even tougher obstacle to cope with, and I had to agree.

'But I don't like the idea of a mind-reading detective,' I said, 'it makes him too special.'

'No, no,' Horace said. 'You've got to create an entire Esper society.'

And so the creation began. We discussed it on the phone almost daily, each making suggestions, dismissing suggestions, adapting and revising suggestions. Horace was, at least for me, the ideal editor, always helpful, always encouraging,

never losing his enthusiasm. He was opinionated, God knows, but so was I, perhaps even more than he. What saved the relationship was the fact that we both knew we respected each other; and our professional concentration on the job. For professionals the job is the boss.

The writing began in New York. When my show went off for the summer, I took the ms out to our summer cottage on Fire Island and continued there. I remember a few amusing incidents. For a while I typed on the front porch. Wolcott Gibbs, the *New Yorker* drama critic, lived up the street and every time he passed our cottage and saw me working he would denounce me. Wolcott had promised to write a biography of Harold Ross that summer and hadn't done a lick of work yet. I. F. (Izzy) Stone dropped in once and found himself in the midst of an animated discussion of political thought as reflected by science fiction. Izzy became so fascinated that he asked us to take five while he ran home to put a fresh battery in his hearing-aid.

I used to go surf-fishing every dawn and dusk. One evening I was minding my own business, casting and thinking of nothing in particular when the idea of using typeface symbols in names dropped into my mind. I reeled in so quickly that I fouled my line, rushed to the cottage and experimented on the typewriter. Then I went back through the ms and changed all the names. I remember quitting work one morning to watch an eclipse and it turned cloudy. Obviously somebody up there didn't approve of eclipse-breaks. And so, by the end of the summer, the novel was finished. My working title had been 'Demolition'. Horace changed it to *The Demolished Man*. Much better, I think.

The book was received with considerable enthusiasm by the *Galaxy* readers, which was gratifying but surprising. I hadn't had any conscious intention of breaking new trails, I was just trying to do a craftsmanlike job. Some of the fans' remarks bemused me. 'Oh, Mr Bester! How well you understand women.' I never thought I understood women. 'Who were the models for your characters?' They're surprised when I tell them that the model for one of the protagonists was a bronze statue of a Roman emperor in the Metropolitan

museum. It's haunted me ever since I was a child. I read the emperor's character into the face and when it came time to write this particular fictional character I used my emperor for the mould.

The *reclame* of the novel turned me into a science fiction somebody and people were curious about me. I was invited to gatherings of the science fiction Hydra Club where I met the people I was curious about; Ted Sturgeon, Jim Blish, Tony Boucher, Ike Asimov, Avram Davidson, then a professional Jew wearing a yarmulka, and many others. They were all lunatic (So am I. It takes one to spot one.) and convinced me again that most science fiction authors have marbles missing. I can remember listening to an argument about the correct design for a robot which became so heated that for a moment I thought Judy Merril was going to punch Lester del Rey in the nose. Or maybe it was *vice versa.*

I was particularly attracted to Blish and Sturgeon. Both were soft-spoken and charming conversationalists. Jim and I would take walks in Central Park during his lunch hour (he was then working as a public relations officer for a pharmaceutical house) and we would talk shop. He was very serious. Although I was an admirer of his work I felt that it lacked the hard drive to which I'd been trained, and I constantly urged him to attack his stories with more vigour. He never seemed to resent it, or at least was too courteous to show it. His basic problem was how to hold down a PR writing job and yet write creatively on the side. I had no advice for that. It's a problem which very few people have solved.

Sturgeon and I used to meet occasionally in bars for drinks and talk. Ted's writing exactly suited my taste which is why I thought he was the finest of us all. But he had a quality which amused and exasperated me. Like Mort Sahl and a few other celebrities I've interviewed – Tony Quinn is another – Ted lived on crisis and if he wasn't in a crisis he'd create one for himself. His life was completely disorganized, so it was impossible for him to do his best work consistently. What a waste!

I'd written a contemporary novel based on my tv experiences and it had a fairly decent reprint sale and at last sold to

the movies. My wife and I decided to blow the loot on a few years abroad. We put everything into storage, contracted for a little English car, stripped our luggage down to the bare minimum and took off. The only writing materials I took with me were a portable, my Commonplace Book, a thesaurus and an idea for another science fiction novel.

For some time I'd been toying with the notion of using the *Count of Monte Cristo* pattern for a story. The reason is simple; I'd always preferred the anti-hero and I'd always found high drama in compulsive types. It remained a notion until we bought our cottage on Fire Island and I found a pile of old *National Geographics.* Naturally I read them and came across a most interesting piece on the survival of torpedoed sailors at sea. The record was held by a Philippine cook's helper who lasted for something like four months on an open raft. Then came the detail that racked me up. He'd been sighted several times by passing ships which refused to change course to rescue him because it was a Nazi submarine trick to put out decoys like this. The magpie mind darted down, picked it up, and the notion was transformed into a developing story with a strong attack.

The Stars My Destination (I've forgotten what my working title was) began in a romantic white cottage down in Surrey. This accounts for the fact that so many of the names are English. When I start a story I spend days reading maps and telephone directories for help in putting together character names – I'm very fussy about names – and in this case I used English maps and directories. I'm compelled to find or invent names with varying syllables; one, two, three, and four. I'm extremely sensitive to tempo. I'm also extremely sensitive to word colour and context. For me there is no such thing as a synonym.

The book got under way very slowly and by the time we left Surrey for a flat in London I had lost momentum. I went back, took it from the top and started all over again, hoping to generate steam pressure. I write out of hysteria. I bogged down again and I didn't know why. Everything seemed to go wrong. I couldn't use a portable but the only standard machines I could rent had English keyboards. That threw me

off. English ms paper was smaller than the American and that threw me off. And I was cold, cold, cold. So in November we packed and drove to the car ferry at Dover, with the fog snapping at our ass all the way, crossed the Channel and drove south to Rome.

After many adventures we finally settled into a penthouse apartment on the Piazza della Muse. My wife went to work in Italian films. I located the one (1) standard typewriter in all Rome with an American keyboard and started in again, once more taking it from the top. This time I began to build up momentum, very slowly, and was waiting for the hysteria to set in. I remember the day that it came vividly.

I was talking shop with a young Italian film director for whom my wife was working, both of us beefing about the experimental things we'd never been permitted to do. I told him about a note on synesthesia which I'd been dying to write as a tv script for years. I had to explain synesthesia – this was years before the exploration of psychedelic drugs – and while I was describing the phenomenon I suddenly thought, 'Jesus Christ! This is for the novel. It leads me into the climax'. And I realized that what had been holding me up for so many months was the fact that I didn't have a fiery finish in mind. I must have an attack and a finale. I'm like the old Hollywood gag – 'start with an earthquake and build to a climax'.

The work went well despite many agonies. Rome is no place for a writer who needs quiet. The Italians *fa rumore* (make noise) passionately. The pilot of a Piper Cub was enchanted by a girl who sunbathed on the roof of a mansion across the road and buzzed her, and me, every morning from seven to nine. There were frequent informal motorcycle rallies in our piazza and the Italians always remove the mufflers from their vehicles; it makes them feel like Tazio Nuvolare. On the other side of our penthouse a building was in construction and you haven't heard *rumore* until you've heard stonemasons talking politics.

I also had research problems. The official US library was woefully inadequate. The British Consul library was a love and we used it regularly, but none of their books was dated

later than 1930, no help for a science fiction writer needing data about radiation belts. In desperation I plagued Tony Boucher and Willy Ley with letters asking for information. They always came through, bless them, Tony on the humanities – 'Dear Tony, what the hell is the name of that Russian sect that practised self-castration? Slotsky? Something like that.' – Willy on the disciplines – 'Dear Willy, how long could an unprotected man last in naked space? Ten minutes? Five minutes? How would he die?'

The book was completed about three months after the third start in Rome; the first draft of a novel usually takes me about three months. Then there's the pleasant period of revision and rewriting; I always enjoy polishing. What can I say about the material? I've told you about the attack and the climax. I've told you about the years of preparation stored in my mind and my Commonplace Book. If you want the empiric equation for my science fiction writing, for all my writing, in fact, it's:

$$\text{Concept} + \left\{\begin{array}{l}\text{Discipline}\\ \text{Experiment}\\ \text{Experience}\\ \text{Pattern sense}\\ \text{Drama sense}\\ \text{Preparation}\\ \text{Imagination}\\ \text{Extrapolation}\\ \text{Hysteria}\end{array}\right\} = \text{Story} \leftrightarrows \text{Statement}$$

I must enlarge on this just a little. The mature science fiction author doesn't merely tell a story about Brick Malloy vs The Giant Yeastmen from Gethsemane. He makes a statement through his story. What is the statement? Himself, his own dimension and depth. His statement is seeing what everybody else sees but thinking what no one else has thought, and having the courage to say it. The hell of it is that only time will tell whether it was worth saying.

Back in London the next year I was able to meet the young English science fiction authors through Ted Carnell and my London publisher. They gathered in a pub somewhere off the Strand. They were an entertaining crowd, speaking with a rapidity and intensity that reminded me of a debating team from the Oxford Union. And they raised a question which I've never been able to answer: Why is it that the English science fiction writers, so brilliant socially, too often turn out rather dull and predictable stories? There are notable exceptions, of course, but I have the sneaky suspicion that they had American mothers.

John Wyndham and Arthur Clarke came to those gatherings. I thought Arthur rather strange, very much like John Campbell, utterly devoid of a sense of humour and I'm always ill-at-ease with humourless people. Once he pledged us all to come to the meeting the following week; he would show slides of some amazing underwater photographs he had taken. He did indeed bring a projector and slides and show them. After looking at a few I called, 'Damn it, Arthur, these aren't underwater shots. You took them in an aquarium. I can see the reflections in the plate glass'. And it degenerated into an argument about whether the photographer and his camera had to be underwater too.

It was around this time that an event took place which will answer a question often asked me: Why did I drop science fiction after my first two novels? I'll have to use a flashback, a device I despise, but I can't see any other way out. A month before I left the States my agent called me in to meet a distinguished gentleman, senior editor of *Holiday* magazine, who was in search of a feature on television. He told me that he'd tried two professional magazine writers without success, and as a last resort wanted to try me on the basis of the novel I'd written about the business.

It was an intriguing challenge. I knew television but I knew absolutely nothing about magazine piece-writing. So once again I explored, experimented and taught myself. *Holiday* liked the piece so much that they asked me to do pieces on Italian, French and English tv while I was abroad, which I did. Just when my wife and I had decided to settle in London permanently, word came from *Holiday* that they

wanted me to come back to the States. They were starting a new feature called 'The Antic Arts' and wanted me to become a regular monthly contributor. Another challenge. I returned to New York.

An exciting new writing life began for me. I was no longer isolated in my workshop; I was getting out and interviewing stimulating people in interesting professions. Reality had become so colourful for me that I no longer needed the therapy of science fiction. And since the magazine imposed no constraints on me, outside of the practical requirements of professional magazine technique, I no longer needed a safety valve.

I wrote scores of pieces, and I confess that they were much easier than fiction, so perhaps I was lazy. But try to visualize the joy of being sent back to your old university to do a feature on it, going to Detroit to test-drive their new cars, covering the NASA centers, taking the very first flight of the Boeing 747, interviewing Sophia Loren in Pisa, De Sica in Rome, Peter Ustinov, Sir Laurence Olivier (they called him Sir Larry in Hollywood), Mike Todd and Elizabeth Taylor, George Balanchine. I interviewed and wrote, and wrote, and wrote, until it became cheaper for *Holiday* to hire me as Senior Editor, and here was a brand new challenge.

I didn't altogether lose touch with science fiction; I did book reviews for *Fantasy & Science Fiction* under Bob Mills' editorship and later Avram Davidson's. Unfortunately, my standards had become so high that I seemed to infuriate the fans who wanted special treatment for science fiction. My attitude was that science fiction was merely one of many forms of fiction and should be judged by the standards which apply to all. A silly story is a silly story whether written by Robert Heinlein or Norman Mailer. One enraged fan wrote in to say that I was obviously going through change of life.

Alas, all things must come to an end. *Holiday* failed after a robust twenty-five years; my eyes failed, like poor Congreve's; and here I am, here I am, back in my workshop again, immured and alone, and so turning to my first love, my original love, science fiction. I hope it's not too late to rekindle the affair. Ike Asimov once said to me 'Alfie, we

broke new trails in our time but we have to face the fact that we're over the hill now.' I hope not, but if it's true I'll go down fighting for a fresh challenge.

What am I like? Here's as honest a description of myself as possible. You come to my workshop, a three-room apartment, which is a mess, filled with books, mss, typewriters, telescopes, microscopes, reams of typing paper, chemical glassware. We live in the apartment upstairs and my wife uses my downstairs kitchen for a storeroom. This annoys me; I used to use it as a laboratory. Here's an interesting sidelight. Although I'm a powerful drinker I won't permit liquor to be stored there; I won't have booze in my workshop.

You find me on a high stool at a large drafting table editing some of my pages. I'm probably wearing flimsy pyjama bottoms, an old shirt and am barefoot; my customary at-home clothes. You see a biggish guy with dark brown hair going grey, a tight beard nearly all white and the dark brown eyes of a sad spaniel. I shake hands, seat you, hoist myself on the stool again and light a cigarette, always chatting cordially about anything and everything to put you at your ease. However, it's possible that I like to sit higher than you because it gives me a psychological edge. I don't think so, but I've been accused of it.

My voice is a light tenor (except when I'm angry; then it turns harsh and strident) and is curiously inflected. In one sentence I can run up and down an octave. I have a tendency to drawl my vowels. I've spent so much time abroad that my speech pattern may seem affected, for certain European pronunciations cling to me. I don't know why. GA-rahj for garage, the French *r* in the back of the throat, and if there's a knock on the door I automatically holler, '*Avanti!*' a habit I picked up in Italy.

On the other hand my speech is larded with the customary profanity of the entertainment business, as well as Yiddish words and professional phrases. I corrupted the WASP *Holiday* office. It was a camp to have a blond junior editor from Yale come into my office and say, 'Alfie, we're having a *tsimmis* with the theater piece. That *goniff* won't rewrite'. What you don't know is that I always adapt my speech

pattern to that of my vis-à-vis in an attempt to put him at his ease. It can vary anywhere from burley (burlesque) to Phi Beta Kappa.

I try to warm you by relating to you, showing interest in you, listening to you. Once I sense that you're at your ease I shut up and listen. Occasionally I'll break in to put a question, argue a point, or ask you to enlarge on one of your ideas. Now and then I'll say 'wait a minute, you're going too fast. I have to think about that.' Then I stare into nowhere and think hard. Frankly, I'm not lightning, but a novel idea can always launch me into outer space. Then I pace excitedly, exploring it out loud.

What I don't reveal is the emotional storms that rage within me. I have my fair share of frustrations and despairs, but I was raised to show a cheerful countenance to the world and suffer in private. Most people are too preoccupied with their own troubles to be much interested in yours. Do you remember Viola's lovely line in *Twelfth Night*? 'And with a green and yellow melancholy, she sat like Patience on a monument, smiling at grief.'

I have some odd mannerisms. I use the accusing finger of a prosecuting attorney as an exclamation point to express appreciation for an idea or a witticism. I'm a 'toucher', hugging and kissing men and women alike, and giving them a hard pat on the behind to show approval. Once I embarrassed my boss, the *Holiday* editor-in-chief, terribly. He'd just returned from a junket to India and, as usual, I breezed into his office and gave him a huge welcoming hug and kiss. Then I noticed he had visitors there. My boss turned red and told them 'Alfie Bester is the most affectionate straight in the world.'

I'm a faker, often forced to play the scene. In my time I've been mistaken for a fag, a hardhat, a psychiatrist, an artist, a dirty old man, a dirty young man, and I always respond in character and play the scene. Sometimes I'm compelled to play opposites – my fast to your slow, my slow to your fast – all this to the amusement and annoyance of my wife. When we get home she berates me for being a liar and all I can do is laugh helplessly while she swears she'll never trust me again.

I do laugh a lot, with you and at myself, and my laughter is loud and uninhibited. I'm a kind of noisy guy. But don't ever be fooled by me even when I'm clowning. That magpie mind is always looking to pick up something.

A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY

Born:	18 Dec. 1913
Height:	6 ft. 1 in.
Weight:	180 lbs.
Hair:	Brown-grey
Eyes:	Brown
Beard:	Grey-brown
Scars:	None
Tattoos:	None
I.Q. (1928):	119

Born 18 December 1913 in New York City and raised there. New York public schools and the University of Pennsylvania, class of 1935. Suffered from what later came to be known as TMA – too many aptitudes. By a fluke sold a story and dropped all the other A's. Professional writer ever since; fiction, comics, radio, tv, interviewer, editor. Not very good to start with but hopefully have improved. Never learned how to spell.

Married in 1936 and still married to the same lady, which is some sort of record these days. She is an actress who is now a swingin' vice-president of an advertising agency. No children (outside of myself). We decided never to give hostages to fortune. Also we were way ahead of Women's Lib. Little remains to be told. I have my ups and downs; big money, no money, but by some strange freak of luck my wife is earning most when I'm earning least. Perhaps we should have become professional gamblers; there's a gambler's streak in all artists. We stake our lives on everything we produce.

Ever since I became aware of writers and writing, I've been irritated by writers who claim to have been cooks, lumber-

jacks, and sandhogs; and whose photographs show them as unshaven persons in hairy sweaters at the tiller of a sloop. It's almost as though writers in America suffer from a terror of being thought effete . . . at least that class of writers who are of the masculine persuasion.

I have never been a cook, a lumberjack, a sandhog, or even a soda-jerk. I've been a writer all my life, and I don't give a damn who knows it. If required, I can produce my favourite photograph of myself, an epicene portrait of a burly gent in Edwardian waistcoat standing on the fire escape of a tenement, brandishing a beautifully furled umbrella. This is symbolic of my background and my taste.

I come from a middle class family, was born on 'The Rock', as genuine New York locals call Manhattan Island, and was raised on The Rock where I was the worst stick-ball player on Post Avenue between Dyckman Street and 204th Street. I went to George Washington High School and, much to my regret, did not play a part in any of the sex scandals that were the gossip of the cafeteria.

I went to the University of Pennsylvania where I was the worst center in the history of Penn football squads, and where I did not discover sulfanilamide. I was given this newfangled drug for an experiment in vital staining in physiology research, and reported that sulfa was useless. I also studied music composition and orchestration, and offended my classmates by arriving stinking to high heaven from dissection work in the comparative anatomy lab. It was a triumph and vindication for me when we first visited Leopold Stokowski's studio. It stank to high heaven from cooked cauliflower.

I began writing when I graduated from college in 1935, only because I'd tried law and medicine, given them up, and was floundering around, wondering what to do with myself. I sold a few stories of the old pulp science fiction sort to *Thrilling Wonder* magazine (Ugh!), and then came the advent of comic books. This fantastic phenomenon exploded into a million dollar industry overnight, and there was a desperate search for writers who could be trained to turn out scenarios for the artists. I wrote stories for comic book heroes with unlikely names like 'the Green Lantern', 'the Star

Spangled Kid', and 'Captain Marvel'. These were the days before sex and sadism polluted the comics, and we had wonderful training in visualization, and tight, crisp, action writing.

With this preparation it was only natural for me to shift to radio script writing. For years I wrote *Charlie Chan, Nick Carter, The Shadow* and other shows. When the shift to television came, I went along with it, but rather reluctantly. Radio had been a tough, demanding craft, without room for fakers. Television was quite the opposite. It was around this time that I began writing science fiction again, solely for release from an entertainment medium which I disliked. After a few stories for *Astounding* and *Fantasy & Science Fiction* I was persuaded by Horace Gold of *Galaxy* to write *The Demolished Man* which had and still has a renown that amazes me.

After three years of tv writing I became so disgusted that I wrote a corrosive novel about the business called *Who He?* (reprinted as *The Rat Race*), took the money from the movie sale, got the hell out of the country and lived abroad for a couple of years. Some people claim I had to get out, but, alas, the book wasn't that corrosive. I only wish it had been. It must always be the mission of the writer to excite and astonish and, if possible, to infuriate.

While I was abroad I wrote another science fiction novel, *The Stars My Destination*, and did some magazine pieces for *Holiday Magazine* who insisted on bringing me back, kicking and screaming, to write their entertainment column. Since then I've been writing magazine features, occasional tv hour specials, and am in hock to my publisher for a couple of books.

I collect XIXth century scientific apparatus, am the world's worst amateur astronomer, am a trustee of my town on Fire Island where I'm also the world's worst surf-fisherman. Last year I took a refresher course in physiology at the graduate school at Washington Square and discovered that science has passed me by, so this year I'm studying bookbinding at the YWCA.

Almost everybody I know has a secret ambition to be a writer. I am a writer, and, typically, I have a secret ambition

to be a scientist. I want to win the Nobel Prize for discovering something like 'Bester's Binomial' or 'Bester's Syndrome' or 'The Fissure of Bester'. I don't think I ever got over that sulfa goof.