

out of my head | Homework required of would-be writers

By Bill Roberts

I once wrote a short story. It was about a boxer who was knocked out and then woke up in a hospital bed and thought he was in Heaven. I submitted the story to *Alicorn*, an as-yet unborn literary magazine conceived by and for UNL undergraduates.

My story was rejected. Why? I have never boxed. I've never even seen a live boxing match. The last time I was in a hospital a doctor slapped my bottom. And Daily Nebraskan staff members are forbidden to enter Heaven for fear of compromising their objectivity.

The point is, I was completely ignorant of my subject. How could I convince readers what it's like to be knocked out when I've never put on boxing gloves?

When you write about something, whether you write prose, poetry or hieroglyphics, you've got to know your subject. Not enough young, unpublished writers of prose fiction do this.

That's part of the reason why *Alicorn* has not come out yet, according to staff member John Ortmann, a junior English major from Bancroft. Ortmann was one of the staff readers of submitted prose fiction. He said that of 30 stories submitted, only one was good enough to publish.

One unacceptable story *Alicorn* received was about mountain climbing, he said. It seemed the author had never done it.

"I'm not a mountain climber either," Ortmann said. "But the characters in the story galloped to the top of a 12,000-foot mountain in a matter of hours, and without equipment."

Another story concerned persons leaving the earth for Mars, via rockets they fired from their backyards. One unfortunate man was left behind and was in danger of being leveled by bulldozers, along with the abandoned houses.

Why was everyone leaving earth? Who'll drive the bulldozers? The reader wasn't told because the author didn't know.

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Some authors show insight

Charles Stubblefield, a UNL English professor who has taught creative writing here for nine years, told me about some good stories he has received from students.

One was about three old men in a small town. Their lives consisted of daily journeys to the domino parlor, a grocery store, and their homes. One day, four armed men, escapees from a nearby reformatory, burst into the grocery store, demanding money and a getaway car.

These three old men, without the use of violence, completely frustrated the escapees. They ended up leaving the store without money or a car, and were soon recaptured.

The old men, set in their ways, were in control of their lives and their environment, Stubblefield said. The escapees could not take away that control even with guns, he said, and the author conveyed that insight with his story.

Another good story from a student, Stubblefield said, portrayed the impressions of a young man who had been smoking marijuana. Told from the stoned character's point of view, the story described an elevator that seemed to become a jail cell, policemen that seemed to be planning a raid and an unnecessary disposal of the marijuana in a toilet.

Certain experiences would be essential to writing a story like that.

Ranch life, growing up, common themes

Other topics UNL students write about, Stubblefield said, include life on ranches and farms, the theme of growing up, and accounts of hunting and camping. He said he has not had a story about Vietnam turned in for

a couple of years, although during the war he could expect three or four a semester.

Stories about skiing regularly come in, he said, but none have captured the essence of the popular sport. Of course, Stubblefield has never had Ralph Crabtree in a class.

Stubblefield said most of the science fiction stories he receives show a lack of adequate background knowledge.

Imagination alone no longer is enough for science fiction writers. Other writers are too good now, and the general public knows too much about all fields of science. The potential writer should know as much, if not more.

That brings up the subject of research. Robert Heinlein and Isaac Asimov have never been to Mars. They've been to the library. That's where John Ortmann advises *Alicorn* contributors to go if they want to write about something they have not experienced.

First issue expected this semester

Yes, the *Alicorn* staff is asking for submissions. They have \$600 from the English Dept. earmarked for a literary magazine, and they hope to produce their first issue in the middle of the spring semester.

Stories, poems and essays should be put in the *Alicorn* box in the English Dept. mailroom, Andrews Hall Room 227. Submissions should be accompanied by a self-addressed stamped envelope.

I've written another story to turn in.

It's about a mathematician who goes to Paris and falls in-love with a gorgeous model. But the Paris weather is too cold, so they decide to go to Mercury, where it's warmer...



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