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The Commonplace Within the Fantastic:
Terry Bisson's Art in the Diversified
Science Fiction Genre

Jane Powell Campbell

A dissertation presented to the
Graduate Faculty of Middle Tennessee State
University in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Arts

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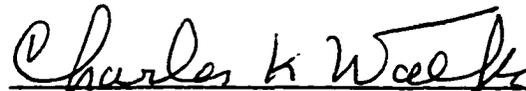
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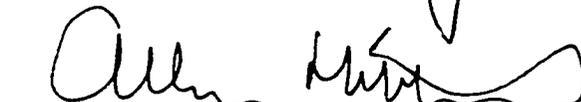
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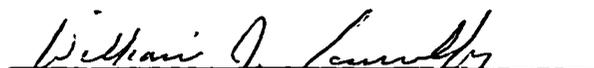
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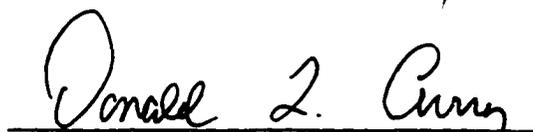
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Dean of the Graduate School

Abstract

The Common Place Within the Fantastic Terry Bisson's Art in the Diversified Science Fiction Genre

by

Jane Powell Campbell

More than seventy years after modern science fiction rose from the less respected pulp magazines, the genre today has respectability and increased popularity. The genre is not easily defined because it contains many sub-genres, and each decade ushers in new forms. This study is about Terry Bisson, a contemporary writer whose work in its diversified nature defines the genre. His five novels and collection of short stories exemplify many of science fiction's subgenres--hard-core, space travel, alternate history, slipstream and fantasy. Moreover, he adds a new dimension with his uncanny juxtaposing of the ordinary within the fantastic.

Chapter One introduces Bisson and his work as it details his philosophy of writing and his writing process. Chapter Two gives a definition of the science fiction genre both historically and from different perspectives. Once the diversity of the genre is given, Bisson's place as a writer of the many forms of the genre is exemplified by his works.

Chapter Three studies his collection of short stories, Bears Discover Fire and Other Stories. His stories offer some of the best examples of the diverse range of the science fiction genre as he develops creative conceits of the commonplace within the fantastic. The stories also provide social criticism on several concerns including encroachment of technology and mass media, the environment, and racism.

Chapter Four takes a look at Bisson's first two novels, Wyrlmaker and Talking Man. While both novels follow certain conventions of the fantasy category, each differs in plot and character development. Wyrlmaker is a type of heroic fantasy with a sword and sorcery plot. Talking Man is a fantasy set in Kentucky about a wizard.

One of the forms derived from the New Wave movement within the genre is the alternate history novel. Chapter Five investigates Bisson's third novel, Fire on the Mountain, which follows this tradition and is an alternate account of John Brown's raid in 1859.

Chapter Six discusses Bisson's fourth and fifth novels, Voyage to the Red Planet and Pirates of the Universe, which have space travel at their heart. However, like the diversified genre in which they belong, they are totally different. The first is about a trip to Mars while the second has a protagonist who travels in three worlds--earth, outer space and virtual reality.

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Chapter Seven concludes that Bisson's versatile forms within the genre, his individual voice and imagination, and his social criticism show his mastery of an art which both entertains and informs.

Acknowledgments

To Terry Bisson, who always so graciously took the time to answer my questions, I express a special gratitude. I especially thank him for the opportunity to meet with him for a personal interview which allowed me the opportunity to hear firsthand the beauty and wonder of his art.

To Professor Charles Wolfe, who has directed my dissertation, I express a special thanks. He has guided my work with patience, understanding, delightful humor, and wisdom.

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Chapter I

Introduction

Terry Bisson and His Work

More than seventy years after the first science fiction magazine, Amazing Stories, was founded in 1926, modern science fiction has risen from its less than respected pulp origins to a popular literary genre. Among the contemporary writers who bring respectability to the genre is Terry Bisson. His short story, "Bears Discover Fire," swept every honor for him in the science fiction field in 1990-91: the Nebula and the Hugo awards and the Theodore Sturgeon short fiction award. This story along with eighteen other stories was published in a collection, Bears Discover Fire & Other Stories, by Tor in 1993.

His acclaim centers around his uncanny juxtaposing of the commonplace within the fantastic. Using wit and satire, Bisson fulfills a general aim of the genre which according to Ray Bradbury is: "To make the extraordinary seem ordinary, and cause the ordinary to seem extraordinary" (qtd. in Philmus 5). "Bears Discover Fire" exemplifies this aim. The ordinary for Bisson is the mid-South rural landscape and culture. In the beginning of the short story he mentions a comealong, a powerful, versatile wrench-like farm tool. Like his use of the word comealong, Bisson's work offers readers delightfully humorous,

entertaining and surprising twists of the ordinary. Like the comealong itself, his writing is structurally sound and can be adapted for versatile use--from fiction to non-fiction, from short stories to novels and from fantasy to science fiction.

Along with his recognition as a celebrated short story writer, Bisson has also earned distinction as a novelist. As of 1997, his five novels include:

Wyrlmaker (Pocket, 1981)--a heroic romance fantasy about a man on a quest aided by a wyzard and a magnificent sword called Wyrlmaker (was on the Locus "Recommended List" of distinguished debut novels for the year)

Talking Man (Arbor House, 1986)--a fantasy novel about a magical odyssey by Talking Man, a wizard, in a 1962 Chrysler
(a World Fantasy Award finalist in 1986)

Fire on the Mountain, (Arbor House, 1988)--an alternate history science fiction about how America would be different today if John Brown's raid on the Federal arsenal had been a success at Harper's Ferry in 1859

Voyage to the Red Planet (Morrow, 1990)--a science fiction novel about the first manned spaceflight to Mars staged by a Hollywood film production company

Pirates of the Universe (Tor, 1996)--a science fiction novel about Gunther Ryder who lives in a

world between reality and virtual reality and who wants to live in the utopian theme park, Pirates of the Universe

His novels have been published in Germany, Italy, Russia, Japan and the United Kingdom.

Two of his stories, "Two Guys From the Future" and "Next" were produced on stage by Donna Gentry at the West Bank Theatre in New York. "Next" was also produced for Pacific Radio by Jim Freund of WBAI's "Hour of the Wolf" ("Terry Bisson Story Showcase" 13 Sept. 1996). Bisson has adapted the works of William Gibson, Greg Bear, Joel Rosenberg, Roger Zelazny, Anne McCaffrey, Jane Austen, and William Shakespeare for comics. According to the Jan. 6, 1998 "Terry Bisson Story Showcase," "Bisson's six-part graphic novel adaptation of Roger Zelazny's first two 'Amber' novels is now on the stands from DC [DC Comics] and "he recently completed Pride and Prejudice, Emma and Henry V for Classics Illustrated (Acclaim Comics)." Bisson also wrote, as "Brad Quentin," three Johnny Quest novels (Demon of the Deep, Peril in the Peaks, and Attack of the Evil Cyber-God) for HarperPrism which were based on the television cartoon series; he co-authored a western Kentucky memoir, A Green River Girlhood, with his aunt Elizabeth Ballantine Johnson in 1992 ("Terry Bisson Story Showcase," 6 Jan. 1998).

He has written four novelizations of four major motion pictures: "William Gibson's Johnny Mnemonic, starring Keanu Reeves; Virtuosity starring Denzel Washington; The Fifth Element by Luc Besson, starring Bruce Willis; and Alien Resurrection with Sigourney Weaver and Winona Ryder" ("Terry Bisson Story Showcase," 6 Jan. 1998). Bisson compares writing novelizations to writing for comics since the stories are not his own and all he is doing is the adaptation (E-mail, 20 April 1995). His non-fiction and reviews have appeared in The Nation, Glamour, Los Angeles Times and The Washington Post. He authored a young adult biography, Nat Turner, Slave Revolt Leader, in 1988 which was published by Chelsea House. He co-authored Car Talk with Click and Clack, The Tappet Brothers (Dell, 1991) with Tom and Ray Magliozzi, the National Public Radio's call-in mechanics. Contemporary Authors notes that Bisson worked as a magazine comic writer from 1964-72, as an automobile mechanic from 1972-77, and as a book editor for Berkley Books in New York City from 1978-85 (35). He owned and operated a left-wing mail-order book service, Jacobin Books, from 1985-1990 with his wife, Judy Jensen ("Terry Bisson," Alpha).

In 1997 Bisson completed a ghost writing assignment on a sequel, entitled St. Leibowitz and the Wild Horse

Woman, to Walter Miller Jr.'s 1960 sci-fi classic, A Canticle for Leibowitz. According to Bisson, Miller "worked 35 years on a sequel. But he died last year [1995] with it still unfinished. His estate hired me to complete the last 100 pages. Miller had written notes to what he wanted it to be" (Lawrence 1C).

A 1964 graduate of the University of Louisville, Bisson was born in 1942 in Madisonville, Kentucky. He grew up in Owensboro, Kentucky and now lives in Brooklyn, New York. A 1960 graduate of Owensboro High School, he was a guest speaker along with fellow classmate and poet Joe Survant in a program, "How One OHS Class Produced Two Writers" at the Tri-State Book Festival in Owensboro on June 15, 1996. The first editor of the school's creative magazine, Scribbles, Bisson comments on his writing experience in high school: "I never wrote fiction at all" and "the idea of writing a short story never occurred to me" ("How One OHS Class"). Actually, most of his writing was devoted to poetry. When asked by an audience member at the book festival if it was true that he had sat on the roof at sunrise and wrote poetry, he replied, "I sat on the roof and pretended to write poetry. It is true" ("How One OHS Class"). He also remembers that at this time there was a feeling that high art and popular art were beginning to mix, and this gave him and other young

artists a confidence to express themselves.

In 1993 Bisson was the keynote speaker at the annual conference of the Southern Humanities Council in Huntsville, Alabama, where he delivered an address on the cultural impact of NASA, "Science Fiction and the Post-Apollo Blues." In 1995 he was one of five international judges for the World Fantasy Award and was a guest of honor at the annual convention.

Chapter two discusses the development of science fiction as a genre and Bisson's place in it. While this study investigates his work as an asset to the genre, Bisson himself recognizes that the genre is from a less respected origin. He compares science fiction to a ghetto and explains, "it means you are not taken seriously, not considered literature, not reviewed on front pages (and not invited to many academic and literary conferences) (E-mail, 20 April 1995). Regardless, he recognizes that the science fiction ghetto does have its benefits: the writer has intelligent readers, and the writer can even get to meet his or her readers. He also compares it to rock and roll, noting that he is proud to be a part of this ghetto even though it is comprised of a lot of terrible writers. He further adds that it contains some of the best and most serious writers working today.

When asked to explain the development of his writing expertise, he replies, "the best way to learn

to write is to read. A lot" (E-mail, 20 April 1995). He recommends not only reading serious works but lots of junk as well. As a child, he was in his own words, "a voracious and indiscriminating reader" (E-mail, 20 April 1995). He read The Reader's Digest, National Geographic, and World Book. According to Bisson, "every generation learns story structure in its own way: by listening to buffalo hunters tell tales around the campfire, by reading comics, by watching TV" (E-mail, 20 April 1995). He affirms that he learned structure from comics and movies as well as reading. He believes that everyone has a sense of story and can recognize it even if one can't always create it.

He explains another childhood influence in an address delivered at the Annual Southern Humanities Council in 1993. In the address, he recalls,

One thing it has always been to be Southern is that you have to go somewhere else to find what you are looking for. I started this process in a small way in my pre-teens, hitchhiking with my friends to Evansville, Indiana, all the way across the muddy Mason-Dixon Line, to scour the used book stores for the Boucher and Merrill anthologies that were not available in a small Kentucky town.

We were not bibliophiles. We read these books, marked them up, traded them, passed them around, wore them out. If we collected them it was only for a while. We composted them.

What we liked about them was that they were not kids' books but not grown-up books either. They were like comics or weeds; they were like rock and roll before rock and roll. They were not respectable, and they were definitely not literature. That is why it seems ironic when I hear of writers (including myself) complain because they are not taken seriously. Hey, wasn't that the whole idea?

(8)

He identifies editing also as an important part of the writing process. When he arrived in New York in 1965, he had an unpublished novel and was looking for a job. He was hired by True Experience, a romance magazine. Bisson recommends magazines as a good training ground. On the job he learned to edit and cut stories to fit column space. After the editing, he says a writer must learn style. He worked several years as a "hack" writer working for hire to handle publicity, magazine articles, romance magazine stories, soft core pornography, cover copy for book jackets and advertising promotionals. He

regards this as "good practice, like playing weddings for a jazz musician. It develops your chops and your ability to play in different styles" (E-mail, 20 April 1995).

In his writing class at the New School for Social Research in New York City, he tells students, "the most a writing class can teach is one or two technical tricks" (E-mail, 20 April 1995). In his class he strives to teach these two tricks mainly and identifies them as follows:

consistency of point of view (who sees what);
and physical dramatization--that is, you should know where your character's hands are at all time. How they are moving. What they are doing. You are not telling a story but acting it out through people. (E-mail, 20 April 1995)

He further admits that these are the two things most important to him as a writer.

When asked what writers have had the greatest influence on him, he lists Clifford Simak, L. Frank Baum, Ray Bradbury, Jack Kerouac, R. A. Lafferty, James Ramsey Ullman, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Kurt Vonnegut, and Nathanael West (E-mail, 20 April 1995). But he adds that these writers are not necessarily his favorites today. At the Owensboro workshop he added Jane Austen and contemporary Pulitzer Prize winning author Jane Smiley to his

list of favorite authors ("How One OHS Class"). Bisson says, "When we are young, a distinctive style can be a strong influence, even when it's not a particularly good style" (E-mail, 20 April 1995). His favorite science fiction books are The Left Hand of Darkness by Ursula K. Le Guin and City, a series of stories by Clifford D. Simak in which man is replaced by a race of intelligent dogs. According to Bisson, City is somewhat old fashioned but still fun to read and does what science fiction is supposed to do--"make you think" (E-mail, 20 April 1995). He credits Louise Brodie, a high school English teacher, as a big influence because she encouraged him to write and gave him books to read. He also recalls another influence when he was seventeen--a genuine beatnick poet who came through Owensboro. This poet called himself "Peter Rabbit" and according to Bisson, "taught me about jazz and poetry and inspired me to become a writer" (E-mail to the author, 20 April 1995). Bisson dedicated his fantasy novel, Talking Man, to Peter Rabbit who lives today in New Mexico.

Bisson has always liked cars and machines and misses working as a car and truck mechanic, a skill he taught himself during the 1960s-70s when he lived in Kentucky and Colorado. According to Bisson, "Fixing cars is more challenging, more intellectual work (problem solving)

than most editorial or writing jobs" (E-mail, 20 April 1995). His second novel, Talking Man, is about a Chrysler. He says that the mechanic in the novel is based on a shade tree mechanic from Warren County, Kentucky who taught him a lot.

Regarding his creative plots, Bisson says, "Most of my inspiration comes from just walking around the world" (E-mail, 20 April 1995). He explains how he gets ideas for his writing:

I get ideas in a flash--I "see" the bears around a campfire while I'm driving. I look at the weeds in a junk-filled vacant lot and I suddenly realize how tenacious life is, and how we take it for granted ("Carl's Lawn and Garden"). I keep a file on my computer of two and three line ideas, like a notebook. I have hundreds of ideas I'll never use. But the idea, the inspiration, doesn't amount to anything without a story. (E-mail, 20 April 1995)

Bisson says that he works every day, usually on weekends too if he has a deadline. He admits that he is a very slow writer and does a lot of rewrites. For example, an editor sees a story only after it has been through at least eight or nine drafts. He saves mornings, from seven until about eleven, for fiction. After lunch he attends to

editing, copywriting, ghost writing and any kind of hack work. Bisson says, "I never touch serious fiction outside of the mornings" (E-mail, 20 April 1995). He likes to read poetry but never writes it, although one of his short stories, "Partial People," was nominated for a poetry award in 1995, the Rhysling Award for Science Fiction Poetry. He works on a Macintosh, a IIsi. Before he had a Mac Plus for years and before then an Apple IIe. He has only written one novel, Wyrldmaker, and one short story, "George," on a typewriter.

Commenting on his writing style, he states:

As you have probably noticed in my fiction, I like to throw out a really wild idea (bears, magical payphone calls, traveling England, etc.) and then have everybody walk around hardly noticing it. This is what I could call my deadpan mode, as opposed to more traditional geehwiz SF such as Necronauts, Shadow Knows, VOYAGE TO THE RED PLANET where everybody goes "gee whiz." (E-mail, 20 April 1995)

When asked if any of his work is autobiographical, he says that "The Green River/Owensboro background of the boy in Talking Man, or the heroine in "The Two Janets" is about as close to autobiography as I get" (E-mail, 20 April 1995). He usually likes to write about people who are as little like him as possible. He says that he does

not write as therapy or self-discovery. He is more interested in discovering things in the outside world than in revealing things about his inner life. He calls this an "external style." Moreover, he tends to be interested in characters who are not very introspective.

When Terry Bisson's reader goes "gee whiz," it perhaps is a result of the clever images which he offers up as he combines the commonplace with the fantastic. Lucie Armitt recognizes this unique quality in science fiction when the writer makes

strange what we commonly perceive to be around us primarily in order that we might focus upon existing reality afresh, and as outsiders.

This is a necessary process if we are to challenge what are commonly taken for granted as "absolutes" or "givens." (10)

Terry Bisson's art is indeed refreshing as he places the "given" of a comealong in a story along side the unexpected drama of bears discovering fire which challenges not only the absolute of nature but also other acceptable absolutes and their social implications. Robert A. Heinlein recognizes this important aspect of science fiction: "Science fiction does have one superiority over all other forms of literature. It is the only branch of literature which even attempts to cope with the real problems of this fast and dangerous world"

(qtd. in Bainbridge 15).

It is my hope that this study of Terry Bisson's work will encourage the reader to appreciate his art as it combines the commonplace and the fantastic while enticing the reader to take closer, thought provoking looks at the social implications of this "fast and dangerous world." Once captured by his quick wit and intrigued by his creative plots and characters, the reader, undoubtedly, will come away from his work echoing many an emphatic "gee whiz."

Chapter II

Bisson's Place in the Genre

When asked if he considers himself a science fiction writer first, Bisson replies that he is identified as a science fiction writer simply because that's how his books are shelved (E-mail, 20 April 1995). He admits that science fiction and fantasy are "marketing tools" which have no clear boundaries. As an example he points to his award-winning short story, "Bears Discover Fire," which he regards as not really a science fiction story.

Science fiction writer and critic Bruce Sterling agrees with Bisson in regard to the marketing of science fiction. With credit to Carter Scholz, Sterling states that "'Category' is a marketing term, denoting rackspace. 'Genre' is a spectrum of work united by an inner identity, a coherent esthetic, a set of conceptual guidelines, an ideology if you will" (2).

Several problems arise as one begins a study of Bisson and his place in the science fiction genre. First, since he is a contemporary writer who is still being published, this study can not be conclusive but rather can only encompass his work up through 1997. Second, there is the problem of defining the genre. Frederick Andrew Lerner in his study, Modern Science Fiction and the American Literary Community, admits that "there is not much agreement on just what the term means" and that "the

science fiction professionals themselves--writers, historians, and critics whose careers are closely associated with science fiction--have reached no consensus" (1).

Definitions of the genre in regards to American literature differ from decade to decade as new subgenres are created. Lerner points out that modern science fiction as a publisher's category began in 1926 with the first issue of Hugo Gernsback's Amazing Stories (151). Early on the genre was characterized with work referred to as hard-core science fiction which primarily dealt with science and technology. Two best-known science fiction writers, Issac Asimov and Robert Heinlein, define the genre under these terms. According to Asimov, "science fiction is that branch of literature which deals with a fictitious society, differing from our own chiefly in the nature or extent of its technological development" (167). Heinlein defines the genre as "realistic speculation about possible. . . events, based solidly on adequate knowledge of the real world, past and present, and on a thorough understanding of the nature and significance of the scientific method" (28). The December 22, 1975 issue of Newsweek included a special report by Peter S. Prescott on the status quo of the genre. According to Prescott, the Golden Age of Science Fiction began in 1939, the year Asimov, Heinlein, A. E. van Vogt and Theodore Sturgeon

began sending stories to Astounding Science Fiction's editor, John W. Campbell (72). Prescott further gives the boundaries of the genre in the two decades following its Golden Age:

For two decades science fiction bristled with robots and rocket ships, space and time warps, alien invaders. . .and remote civilizations whose social structures were curiously similar to those on Earth in the '30s and '40s. Most of the sf [science fiction] of this time was energetic, unliterary stuff; a faith in technology as the cure to problems caused by technology prevailed until Hiroshima and beyond.
(72)

Moreover, Prescott acknowledges that something happened to the genre as the 1960s. He credits such writers as Ursula K. Le Guin and Samuel R. Delany with the innovation referred to as "The New Wave" which became more interested in "sociology and psychology than in physics and chemistry" (72). Brian W. Aldiss in his study, Billion Year Spree: The True History of Science Fiction suggests that this move in the genre was positive. According to Aldiss, "the greatest successes of science fiction are those which deal with man in relation to his changing surroundings and abilities: which might loosely be

called environmental fiction" (11). Much of Bisson's work which deals with social and environmental issues falls into this category. For example, he speaks about the Earth's vanishing natural resources in his novel, Pirates of the Universe.

Along with more psychological and social depth, New Wave writers in the early 1970s began to include more innovations into their craft. One of these was the alternate history story which gained popularity with the publication of Michael Moorcock's The Warlord of the Air and later with Octavia Butler's Wild Seed in the 80's. According to James Gunn, the alternate history story has been traced to Edward Everett Hale's "Hands Off," which was published in Harper's Magazine in 1898 (193). Best examples which Gunn lists include Bring the Jubilee (1953) by Ward Moore, The Man in the High Castle (1962) by Philip K. Dick, Pavane (1968) by Keith Roberts, A Transatlantic Tunnel, Hurrah! (1972) by Harry Harrison and The Alteration (1976) by Kingsley Amis (193-94). Bisson's third novel, Fire on the Mountain, is an alternate history of John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry in 1859.

Another stylistic innovation includes what Bruce Sterling identifies as slipstream. According to Sterling, this type of science fiction is

marked by a cavalier attitude toward "material"
which is the polar opposite of the hard-SF

writer's "respect for scientific fact."

Frequently, historical figures are used in slipstream fiction in ways which outrageously violate the historical record. History, journalism, official statements, advertising copy. . .all of these are grist for the slipstream mill. (4)

Sterling further points out that the slipstream writer deals with "an increasingly difficult question to answer in the videocratic 80s-90s" which is "real compared to what?" (4). A character, Fonda-Fox, in Voyage to the Red Planet, comments on a film's plot as if it is real life as he is caught up in this real/unreal illusion.

From hard-core science to speculative fiction to the New Wave and slipstream along with the addition of fantasy literature, the definition of the term science fiction becomes more elusive as the genre diversifies. Or perhaps the phenomenon is a sign of the times and is what noted social scientist Clifford Geertz refers to as genre blurring. According to Geertz, "this genre blurring is more than just a matter of Harry Houdini or Richard Nixon turning up as characters in novels or of midwestern murder sprees described as though a gothic romancer had imagined them" (19). Geertz further adds that "the present jumbling of varieties of discourse has grown to the point where it is becoming difficult either to label

authors. . .or to classify works" (20). In his second novel, Talking Man, Bisson blurs the genre by including agricultural advice, country music song lyrics and magical hopus pocus in his fantasy story.

From the technical space terminology in Voyage to the Red Planet to the slipstreamish virtual reality scenes in Pirates of the Universe, Bisson's work in the genre deserves a study. The editors of the Columbia Literary History of the United States could very well have been speaking about Bisson when they report "In examining the achievement of recent science fiction, what is certain to strike one is the ability of science fiction to incorporate such a wide range of stylistic influences and thematic concerns" (1167). The editors also recognize that despite the production of what is arguably the most significant body of work in contemporary fiction, the accomplishments of science fiction have continued to remain relative overlooked by the literary establishment in the United States (1167).

This study recognizes the accomplishments of Bisson as a science fiction writer whose works spans the many sub-genres of the genre. Moreover, this study attempts to show how Bisson blurs the genre in his uncanny juxtaposing of the ordinary within the fantastic. Bisson's mix of the ordinary and the fantastic is indeed

a touchstone at the heart of numerous standard definitions of science fiction. Darko Suvin, one of the first acclaimed critics of science fiction, acknowledges SF [science fiction] as a genre when it contains three criteria: novum, cognition, and estrangement (6-9). The novum represents some innovation that departs from the norm and the cognition represents the logical laws of cause and effect. Estrangement is the alienation that the reader experiences when something commonplace is out of context and is portrayed in a new way. Robert Scholes identifies this unique fabulation as "fiction that offers us a world clearly and radically discontinuous from the one we know, yet returns to confront that known world in some cognitive way" (qtd. in McHale 59). Mikhail Bakhtin also endorses the "erasure of boundaries between the terrible and the comical in images of folk culture" and "the mediocre and the terrible, the ordinary and the miraculous, the small and the grand" as an important transcendent role of popular culture in society (154).

The biographical sketch of Bisson in Clute's and Nicholls's The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction describes him as "fluent and moral and wry" and as "one of the writers whose sf speaks to the world" (127). He speaks about the environment, invasion of mass media, racism, family relationships, encroaching technology and other social concerns. As a fluent, moral and wry writer, he

often employs satire to make a statement. Leonard Feinberg in his study, Introduction to Satire, gives a working definition for satire as "a playfully critical distortion of the familiar" (19). Feinberg adds that satire "ridicules man's naive acceptance of individuals and institutions at face value" (3) and "serves a function that the realist and romantic do not fulfill, by dramatizing and exaggerating objectionable qualities in man and society" (17). Bisson uses satire effectively via exaggeration and distortion to show absurdity. While he is making the reader laugh, he is also making the reader think about not only the unreal world in his fiction but also the real world in which the reader lives. Thus, he is a science fiction writer whose work deserves a closer look and appreciation which this study attempts to offer.

Chapter III

Short Stories

Bears Discover Fire and Other Stories

At the Owensboro Tri-State Book Festival held in June 1995, Bisson acknowledged to the hometown audience, "I'm a science fiction writer but mostly a short story writer" ("How One OHS Class"). This is true in part because it is his short stories which have received the most acclaim, including the award-winning "Bears Discover Fire," which was first published in the August 1990 issue of Issac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine and was one of nineteen stories published in a collection, Bears Discover Fire and Other Stories, in 1993. The nineteen stories range from science fiction to fantasy to horror exemplifying Bisson's mastery of the diverse categories in the genre. Some of the stories ("Partial People," "Next," "The Toxic Donut," and "By Permit Only") are set in unrealistic futures with trends exaggerated to unbelievable ends. Others like "Bears Discover Fire," "The Two Janets," "England Underway," and "They're Made Out of Meat" display Bisson's unique genius to develop the fantastic and the most ordinary situation.

In a Locus interview, Bisson says: "My short stories tend to be high concept, built around an idea which can often as not will be a Gary Larson sort of idea" ("Terry Bisson: Finding His Voice" 4). He further

explains this concept in an E-mail to the author:

"Larson usually used cows. But occasionally dogs or bears or even insects to illustrate some revelatory aspect of human existence" (16 Sept. 1997).

In "Bears Discover Fire," Bisson creates a story blending the commonplace--a Southern family facing life's challenges--and the fantastic--bears learning the craft of making fire instead of sleeping for the winter. The plot of the story centers around this phenomenon as it becomes the springboard for the focus of characters' activity in a typical rural Kentucky community.

Aside from this clever conceit, Bisson skillfully weaves statements into his story about current social issues--the faltering family, the invasion of mass media and the encroachment of technology. More importantly, as Paul Kincaid points out, "the sudden evolutionary advance of the bears is only incidental to the story of a family coming to terms with death" (62).

As the story opens, Bobby, the 61-year-old narrator, is with his brother, Warren, and his 12-year-old nephew, Warren Jr. Immediately, the reader sees that there is a stronger bond between uncle and nephew than between father and son. Bobby's car has a flat, and Warren, who is a materialist minister-real estate agent, starts preaching that his brother should have the latest in technology--radials and Flat Fix. The more conservative, resourceful

brother prefers the old-fashioned way--to fix the flat himself. His young nephew sees the value in the craft and defends his uncle.

The bond between the narrator and his nephew grows as the older teaches the younger how to fix flats and corrects his grammar. The sense of caring appears to be not as prevalent in the child's relationship with his father and mother who are "absent parents" and who are never there to teach and nourish their son as his uncle takes time to do. It is in this relationship which Bisson skillfully uses satire to allow the reader to see the facade. They do not spend time with their son, they travel without him, and they have not created a sense of home and security for him. Instead, they move to a bigger house every three months as they apply the techniques which they learn at the Christian Success Retreat in Florida. Warren Jr. is lucky to have his uncle as a substitute parent to instill the best qualities of a loving family. Hence, in a fantastic world of fire-building bears, Bisson includes a growing commonplace social problem--a dysfunctional family.

But Bobby has had a good teacher--his mother, now living in a Home for old folks and waiting complacently to die after living a full life. He is proud of his mother and boasts that she was the first woman bus driver

in Kentucky and that she worked this public job for more than 39 years while being a good mother. This strong bond between mother and son is obvious throughout the story. He takes his brother and nephew to see her every Sunday at the Home, but he also makes the trip every Tuesday and Thursday. He has the knack to almost read his mother's mind and to understand her actions. This is a result of years of loving and sharing within a family unit. For example, he knows exactly where to find his mother when she "escapes" from the nursing home. In the mother, Bisson creates a symbol of change and shows that change, whether it be social or physical (as with the tire), is a fact of life which the narrator sees as natural and inevitable.

Another issue which Bisson includes in his story is the power of the mass media, and he again uses satire to show what media mania can do. When the bears are first sighted with the fires, there is a media blitz. There are more commentaries on commentaries than on the bears themselves. Stories emerge about the bears, ranging from frightful encounters to sidebar stories about a newberry fruit which has lured the bears to the highway medians. All the major television networks are vying for the most newsmaking story. Moreover, the television set itself is seen as dehumanizing in the story. At the Home where the mother stays, the television is used as a pacifier.

The old folks are placed in front of the set so that the flickering will sooth them. Moreover, Warren has become a victim because of his greed for the infomercials which come on television late at night promising him success through a Revolving Equity Success Plan.

The encroachment of technology is symbolized by I-65 in the story, which is also the primary road to the North away from the rural South. I-65 cuts across pastures and literally takes over the land. The mother now sits on the concrete front porch at the Home to look at the interstate where a serene pastoral scene had formerly been. In the story while making his way with his nephew across the median of the interstate, Bobby notices the strangeness of the area. Though it is only 100 yards from his home, the narrator realizes that he has never been there before and that it is almost "like a created country" (17). This alienation caused by setting is often seen in science fiction. For example, a character in J. G. Ballard's urban disaster novel, Concrete Island, becomes marooned on a traffic island between embankments and experiences this isolation of a created space. However, Bobby and his nephew have the courage and fortitude to cross this technological barrier because they have a purpose--to find and meet the bears.

When Bobby tells his mother about the bears and their discovery of fire, she replies with a clichéd but

very cogent literal statement, "What will they think of next" (14). Her world is secure and change does not shake her. When the narrator and his nephew go to find the bears, they do so not as curiosity seekers but as respectful creatures. However, Bobby continues to serve as a mentor to Warren Jr. and advises him not to take the gun to harm the bears. This same sense of concern is shown by the mother after she leaves the Home to find the bears. Bobby and his nephew find his mother sitting around the fire with the bears. When he begins to whisper to her, she chides him for his rudeness because the bears cannot understand what he is saying. She has taught him well the meaning of respect for others. When the trooper finds the threesome at the bears' fire site, he throws the wood which the bears have gathered into the woods. The narrator returns later to the site to cut a new supply of wood for the bears in order to undo the trooper's thoughtless injustice.

Bisson's story is more than a tale about bears discovering fire. Rather, it is a poignant story of three generations who know the art of living and of just being neighborly regardless of changes imposed by time and technology. These three characters do not need a quick fix to live but rather can jimmy-rig with a comealong or just sheer will and live to adapt to any situation. Bisson draws a similar parallel with the bears. The

narrator observes that only a few of the bears know how to use fire and are carrying the others along. The question which the narrator then poses is perhaps the same question which Bisson would turn and ask his reader at the story's end: "But isn't that how it is with everything?" (Bears 21)

In the Afterword of his collection, Bears Discover Fire and Other Stories, Bisson writes, "I came to the short story both early and late" (251). The 19 stories in the collection all were first published in magazines. In 1964, (following the birth of his eldest son, Nathaniel), he wrote his first story, "George," which is about a kid born with wings. "George" won an honorable mention award in a magazine contest sponsored by Story. According to Bisson, "After a couple of false starts, though, I gave up the form entirely" (251). "George" was not published until October 1993 in Pulphouse.

The other stories, also first published in magazines, were written between 1988 and 1993. In 1988 after publishing three novels and after almost a twenty-five year hiatus, he turned again to the short story genre and wrote "Over Flat Mountain." In the Afterword to his collection, he relates the marketing of the story:

It was to me not really a story but the
fictional illustration of a conceit--the

Appalachians being rolled up into one mountain; a goof, if you will. By this time I was a published SF and fantasy author, and when Ellen Datlow asked me if I had ever tried short fiction, I sent her this one with the warning that it was "not an OMNI story."

She told me she would decide what was and what wasn't an OMNI story, thank you very much. And bought it. (251)

After "Over Flat Mountain" was first published in the June 1990 issue of OMNI, Bisson said, "There's nothing like an eighteen hundred dollar sale to revive an interest in short fiction" (251).

The other sixteen stories collected in Bears Discover Fire and Other Stories along with showing the diversity of the science fiction genre share recurrent themes and also are often set in the rural South and centered around the notion of home. "The Two Janets" (first published in Issac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine in August 1990) is a comic tale about famous writers such as John Updike, Saul Bellow and Norman Mailer who suddenly and without explanation move to Owensboro, Bisson's hometown. "They're Made Out of Meat" (first published in the April 1991 issue of Omni) is a humorous dialogue between two aliens about life on Earth. In "Press Ann" (first published in Issac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine,

August 1991) a couple has an unexpected aggressive confrontation with an anytime teller bank machine. "The Coon Suit" (first published in The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction, May 1991) is a horror story about good ole boys out hunting and racism. "Next" (first published in The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction, May 1992) is also a story about racism in which black couples are denied a marriage license because the black genetic material is now considered a priceless national resource and must be shared by interracial marriages. "Necronauts" (first published in Playboy, July 1993) is a hard science fiction story about an artist and his life after death experience. "Are There Any Questions?" (first published in Interzone, August 1992) is a story about New York's garbage being turned via a solid-waste transformer into quality and durable real estate. "Two Guys From the Future" (first published in Omni, August 1992) is a comical story about two art collectors, Stretch and Shorty, who come to Earth to collect masterpieces. "The Toxic Donut" (first published in Science Fiction Age, June 1993) is about the staging of a show where the world will see one person eat a donut in which all the toxic wastes for the year have been collected. "Cancion Autentica de Old Earth" (first published in The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction, October/November 1992) is a surreal tale about visitors coming to Earth watching without

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understanding the ritual of the last existing street troupe. "Partial People" (first published in The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction, December 1993) is a haunting tale about how humans lacking in a physical body part are devalued. "Carl's Lawn & Garden" (first published in Omni, January 1992) is about a character named Carl and his assistant running around New Jersey trying to save the last living plants. "The Message" (first published in Issac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine, October 1993) is about a project to communicate with dolphins which ends with the message that all is forgiven and that it's time to come home. In "England Underway" (first published in Omni, July 1993) Mr. Fox, a resident of Brighton, England, becomes involved in an adventure in which his country sets sail across the Atlantic Ocean. "By Permit Only" (first published in Interzone, July 1993) is an environmental story carried to extremes when polluters can buy a license from EPA allowing them to pollute legally. "The Shadow Knows" (first published in Issac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine, September 1993) deals with a traditional science fiction theme of first encounter with an alien. However, in this story the twist is that the retired lunar explorer is attempting communication with a shadowlike figure whose message is nothing more than a "wave from a passing ship" (Bears 248).

One of the recurrent themes in these stories is the

fate of the environment. Bisson's favorite environment story is "Carl's Lawn and Garden," which is, according to him, "in an inverted sort of way, about how lucky we are that nature is (so far) unkillable" (E-mail 20 April 1995). The story centers around Carl and his assistant who work feverishly to save the plants still living. They work in a world where a university spends millions of dollars to grow trees as a matter of public relations, where suburb owners pour an excessive amount of chemicals and fertilizers on their lawns, and where a restaurant simply uses a hologram instead of real trees for decor. Another environment story, "By Permit Only," according to Bisson, "grew out of the TVA practice of selling pollution credits" (E-mail 20 April 1995). Bisson begins his story with the believable permits of having landfills in the poor part of town. As the story develops, the permits become more and more bizarre as people are legally allowed to do the unthinkable. For example, one can buy a permit that allows a certain person to be mugged.

Many of the stories are set in the rural South and center around the notion of home. It is in these stories that Bisson's juxtaposition of the ordinary with the fantastic achieves its highest art. One such story is "Over Flat Mountain." According to John Kessel, this tale's characters "would not be out of place in a Bobbie Ann Mason story, despite its bizarre circumstances the

story illuminates ordinary life" (43). The bizarre in the story is its premise that the Appalachian Mountains have pushed up into a huge flat mountain range rising above the Earth's atmosphere separating the Midwest from the Atlantic seaboard. Truckers make their way across using a 35,000 foot cog railway, robot trains, and pressurized vacuum-proof trucks. The ordinary in the story is a middle-aged trucker bound from Indianapolis to Charlotte who picks up a young hitchhiker. As the story unfolds, the trucker recognizes that the young boy is just like him when he first left home.

Kessel points out that Bisson's stories "also resemble contemporary fiction more than most sf today" (43). One such "evocative moment" in "Over Flat Mountain" is when the trucker-narrator thinks to himself:

It's amazing to me that so many people could live for so long in those little mountains and leave so little sign. . . . I popped in Hank Senior and the kid whimpered a little from a dream. At that minute I might have been driving past his great-granddaddy's grave. I could tell from the way he talked it was up here somewhere. . . . Somewhere in those endless wrinkled little hills that got unwrinkled and raised up, and rolled their children out into the world, rubbing their

eyes and wondering when they get to go home.

(Bears 51)

Kessel also points out that Bisson's short stories are virtually all told in the first person and that "we get a distinct sense of the person speaking" (43). He adds that science fiction writers are not usually noted for voice. Rather, more attention is usually focused on the unusual event, not the teller of the tale. He likens Bisson to Southern writers who share a tradition of writing stories told in the first person by someone with a distinctive regional voice.

Bisson clarifies his use of voice in an E-mail to the author (20 April 1995). He states that unlike a lot of writers who tend to use first person as a deeply subjective or as a confessional device, he does not. He suggests that a reader should distinguish that first and third person are not that different for him. He gives an example from two of his stories, "Bears Discover Fire" and "England Underway" and says that he does not think that the two stories [The first uses first person and the second employs third person] are all that different in tone.

Speaking about characterization, Bisson states in the e-mail to the author (20 April 1995) that he does not like to go too deeply into a character. He says, "I

would rather reveal things by what shows on the surface." As an example he refers to "Bears Discover Fire" to show his technique with the first person narrator. He states, "Even when a character is telling a story ("Bears") he's not telling you much about himself; or he doesn't think he is. He's not a 'let me tell you about myself' kind of guy."

He also says that the same is true with the first person narrator in the short story, "The Two Janets," who is a woman. "Writing from a woman's point of view is usually not so hard for me, since I stay on the surface" (E-mail 20 April 1995). However, Bisson admits that he did find writing from a woman's point of view difficult when he was creating "The Joe Show" for Playboy during the summer of 1994. He recalls the difficulty with the short story:

The PB [Playboy] fiction editor, Alice Turner helped me get it right. For example, I had the heroine admiring herself (nude) in the mirror; Alice points out that women are usually self-critical not self-admiring. I had her drinking beer out of a can and Alice made me turn it into wine in a glass. Little stuff but character is all in the details. It was an interesting exercise, a guy writing a woman's story for a men's magazine with a woman

editor. (E-mail 20 April 1995)

In the Afterword to Bears Discover Fire and Other Stories, Bisson refers to "The Two Janets" and "Over Flat Mountain" as the fictional illustration of a conceit (251). In the E-mail to the author (20 April 1995), he states, "When I say I use conceit it's just an old fashioned way of saying intricate or tricky ideas." He gives as examples all of the Appalachians rolled up into one big mountain in "Over Flat Mountain," all writers move to Owensboro in "The Two Janets," and England drifting across the Atlantic in "England Underway." He continues that the conceit forms the basis on which the real story hinges. For example, he identifies the real story in the three short stories just mentioned respectively as the truck driver and his own youth represented in the kid, Janet and her relationship with her nutty mother, and the old man and his family in America.

In commenting about his conclusions, he points out,

You'll notice that a lot of my stories have "tags" or little codas: going to the graveyard in Bears ["Bears Discover Fire"], the next morning in Flat Mtn ["Over Flat Mountain"], the end of Necronauts ["Necronauts"] or the turtles in Shadow ["The Shadow Knows"]. (E-mail 20 April 1995)

While he recognizes that this is a "sort of old fashioned device," he is not sure if this technique is good or bad.

Old fashioned they are not. Bisson's stories offer some of the best examples of the diverse range of the science fiction genre as Bisson develops creative conceits of the fantastic within the commonplace. Kessel affirms the uniqueness of Bisson's art: "Lots of people can write ordinary stories, not many have a unique voice, or the skewed viewpoints that informs these fairy tales about real people" (45).

Chapter IV

Fantasy:

Wyrdmaker and Talking Man

In the last chapter Bisson's short stories are referred to as "fairy tales about real people." Moreover, his first two novels, Wyrdmaker and Talking Man, are categorized as fantasy, a type of a "complicated fairy tale" which according to Stith Thompson in his study, The Folktale, involves a protagonist who must confront a supernatural adversary (23). Wyrdmaker, which is a type of heroic fantasy with a sword and sorcery plot is about Kemen, a warrior with a magical sword, who is on a quest to find Noese, the woman he loves. Talking Man's protagonist, who shares his name with the novel, is a combination of a backwoods Kentucky farmer, mechanic and a wizard with supernatural powers. Talking Man's quest involves saving the world from being destroyed by Dgene, his evil sister. While both novels differ in plot and character development, each follows certain conventions which place them in the fantasy sector of science fiction securing for Bisson his place in this form of the diversified genre.

Unlike his short stories, Bisson's first novel, Wyrdmaker, published in 1981 by Pocket/Timescape, does not juxtapose the commonplace with the fantastic. According to Paul Kincaid in his review of Bisson's work,

this is the novel's weakness. Kincaid says, "The importance of Bisson working, even subversively, within a tradition is shown" in this novel because the work contains "nothing of the rural South, none of the lapel-grabbing conversational manner" as in his other work (62).

The plot centers around Kemen, a warrior and king who is presented a magical sword, *Wyrdmaker*, by a beautiful, allusive woman, Noese. The sword has magical powers and makes Kemen invincible in battle, regardless of the power or the number of the foes which he confronts. Noese disappears and leaves Kemen with only her memory and a son, Hayl. Years later as the story opens, Kemen does the unthinkable in his native land of Treyn. He abandons a child bride which has been chosen for him to create peace and becomes involved in several bloody battles before he decides to leave in search of Noese.

Kincaid points out that Kemen carries the "magical sword through a series of bloody adventures in increasingly bizarre 'worlds' until the sword is revealed to be a vital instrument in a planet-seeding enterprise which owes something to James Blish's The Seedling Stars" (62). Here Kincaid is referring to Blish's treatment of human transformation in science fiction (of which The Seedling Stars is a classic) consisting of a series of stories deploying the idea that a "seeding" program to preserve the human race would be possible as humans could be

transformed into creatures that could exist in other environments. In Wyrlmaker Bisson creates fantastic creatures in strange environments with which Kemen must battle. In his quest he is joined with a mysterious woman, Maer Ash, who, even though she becomes romantically involved with him, aids him in his search for Noese. When Kemen and Maer Ash find Noese, they discover that she is a god-like creation and that her power with the aid of Wyrlmaker creates the universe as we know it.

In an e-mail to the author, Bisson says that,

it's [Wyrlmaker] very derivative of Moorcock, it's a "generation space ship novel disguised as a fantasy" (as pointed out by John Clute in his Encyclopedia of SF), and I discovered writing it how difficult it is to write a book without day or night. (15 Sept. 1997)

Michael Moorcock, to whom Bisson refers, has written several sword and sorcery novels dealing with heroes and quests and strange lands and battles. According to Clute and Nicholls in The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction, "the term 'sword and sorcery' is said to have been coined by [Fritz] Leiber" (410). The editors add that "the term is often used in a derogatory manner which partly explains its gradual displacement by the term heroic fantasy" and that the story is "set in a coherent and quite carefully

imagined world (presented as an enormously archaic version of our own) (410).

The heroic fantasy is a form of high fantasy. Marshall B. Tymn, Kenneth J. Zahorski and Robert H. Boyer in the introduction to Fantasy Literature: A Core Collection and Reference Guide distinguish between low fantasy and high fantasy: while low fantasy includes the supernatural in the world as we know it, high fantasy features an imaginary world which is alternate to ours (5). According to Tzvetan Todorov, in The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre, the fantastic in literature appears between the credible (uncanny) and the incredible (marvelous) (41). Using Todorov's terms, most of the events in Wyrdmaker are of the marvelous realm. Clute and Nicholls further use understanding of the fantastic realm:

At the extreme fantasy end of the spectrum the imaginary worlds tend, strongly, to be conceptually static; history is cyclical; the narrative form is almost always the quest for an emblematic object or person; the characters are emblematic too, most commonly of a dualistic (even Manichean) system where good confronts evil; most fundamentally of all, the protagonists are trapped in pattern. (410)

This description applies to the situation in Wyrdmaker. Kemen is a hero who appears trapped in his

destiny to seek out Noese. The sword, *Wyrlldmaker*, appears to him almost magically to beckon him to do battle, leave his country and make the impossible journey to find her. *Wyrlldmaker*, which is distinguished by a large blue stone, is unlike other swords. *Wyrlldmaker's*

thirst for blood was deep. It was not like the yellow knives used in the wars on fish and men that lost their eagerness so quickly that a warmaker had to carry four in his sash hanger, as well as a stone to remind them how to kill. The blue stone sword reminded men. Half again as long as half a man, it cut the air with the dreadful sound of widows whispering. . . .

(Wyrlldmaker 27)

Although *Kemen* is torn between being with his son and with seeking *Noese*, he cannot resist the power which *Wyrlldmaker* has over him to battle. Even though he is tired of battle, he cannot resist the temptation to pick it up when it washes ashore and suddenly appears at his feet. "He thought for a moment he was going to weep, but his face danced like water and all that came was a mad laugh. He took up the sword and scattered kings like leaves" (Wyrlldmaker 25). However, *Kemen* always appears to represent good as he comes into contact with several evil forces and creatures. Moreover, during his quest for *Noese*, he recognizes his lack of choice. He says, "I was once a king. Now I am a man with

a sword more powerful than himself, on a mission he does not understand" (Wyrlmaker 65).

According to Gary K. Wolfe in his study, The Known and the Unknown, "the image of the monster is probably the oldest and simplest symbol of transformation in science fiction and the one in which the individual most directly confronts the forces of the unknown" (185). The monsters which Kemen confronts become more bizarre the further he goes into his journey. In one city he watches a crowd of beings in a crowded street. He notes that some "are winged, like the Alo of the world he had known, but armed and with fiercer eyes. One he saw was furred and striped; another with a lizard's head dodged through the crowd" (Wyrlmaker 51). In one battle Kemen is attacked by large, faceless flying insects which have "tongues making gray-wet circles in the air in front of them" (Wyrlmaker 121). The insects have tongues which are as strong as ropes of iron and wrap themselves around Kemen's neck and chest. There are also "draggons" which have teeth on their wings and teeth on their feet.

However, the most "unknown" of the creatures which Kemen must confront is Mone. At first, Mone appears to be a friend who offers to help Kemen. When Kemen first meets him, he is a "mournful white hillock of a man with a ring on each fat finger" (Wyrlmaker 52). During a battle aboard the ship, Corec, Mone is killed. However, Kemen

later discovers that Mone, able to clone himself, is still alive when he finds him sitting

on a pile of pillows fondling a naked creature that lay in his arms. It has one pink arm that ended in fingers heavy with rings, and the rest of its body was blueish and smooth. Its unformed face was Mone's. The arm he had lost on the Corec had grown a new body, just as the body had grown a new arm. (Wyrlmaker 108)

Mone cannot be destroyed but rather multiplies and becomes a foe. When the "draggon" are attacking Kemen, on the back of each rides a cloned Mone. This scene with multiple Mones aboard the draggons and Kemen wielding Wyrlmaker is bizarre: "On the back of each draggon a naked Mone screamed, neither fighting nor shrinking from the fight, just screaming: still screaming as they fell in pieces through the air" (Wyrlmaker 161).

The conclusion takes on dimensions of a fairy tale of creation. When Kemen and Maer Ash find Noese, she tells them that she is the captain of the starship which rides through the universe to seed new stars as she acts as creator of new worlds. Noese leaves them as she uses the magic of the sword to create the universe as we know it. Kemen and Maer Ash find themselves alone like Adam and Eve in a brave new world in the novel's final scene:

The wyrl was lighter still. Behind them a hill

was covered with the remains of a shattered forest.
In front of them was the sea.

Then at the faraway edge of it, they saw the
strangest thing either of them had ever seen.

They saw the sun coming up. (Wyrldmaker 176)

This final scene with the romantically connected hero
and female further characterizes Wyrldmaker as an heroic
romance which is the label Bisson gives to his first novel.
in an interview in Locus ("Terry Bisson: Finding the Voice"
4). In the interview, he admits:

It was written for the market, but I'm not the
least bit ashamed of it. It got me over a
ten-year writer's block and I realized that you
didn't have to be Hemingway or Fitzgerald to write
a novel. It helped me get back into wanting to be
a novelist. (4)

Bisson published his second novel, Talking Man, five
years later. In his review of Bisson's work, Kincaid
comments, "It is hard to recognize that the author of
Wyrldmaker is the same person who went on to write Talking
Man" (62). While Kincaid finds little to celebrate about
the fantasy formula elements of the first novel, he praises
the second in which Bisson finds "his milieu, and the voice
to go with it" (62). It is this voice which speaks of the
American South while combining the commonplace with the
fantastic that would later permeate his best work.

Once again combining the ordinary with the fantastic using his distinctive style, Bisson personalizes the protagonist of his second novel, *Talking Man*, using a mix of fantasy and Southern culture. Introducing his concept of "cognitive estangement," Suvin states: "Basically SF is a developed oxymoron, a realistic irreality" (viii). Nowhere in Bisson's work does he depict such a creative example of a science fiction oxymoron as he does in the characterization of *Talking Man*, who is a down-to-earth mechanic and a wizard.

As in "Bears Discover Fire," Bisson uses in *Talking Man* the theme showing the importance of a protagonist using mechanical know-how. In fact, Bisson says, "The mechanic in TM [*Talking Man*] was based on a shade tree (hillbilly) mechanic from Warren County, Kentucky who taught me a lot" (E-mail, 20 April 1995). Some of *Talking Man*'s wonder could perhaps be attributed to Peter Rabbit, "a genuine beatnik poet" who "happened through Owensboro" in 1959 and who according to Bisson, "taught me about jazz and poetry and inspired me to become a writer" (E-mail, 20 April 1995). The novel is dedicated to him.

The reader is introduced to *Talking Man*'s fascinating commonplace-fantastic nature in the novel's opening scene:

Talking Man was a wizard who had a small
junkyard on the side of the hill on the
Kentucky Tennessee line. He sold parts and

cars, swapped guns and cars, fixed farm machinery and cars, dug ginseng and mayapple in season, and had an 1,100-pound allotment of burley tobacco which he let his daughter raise. He kept no chickens, no hogs and no dogs. (9)

Also, he is more than a wizard. He is a god-like figure who created the world. Dgene, his soulless sister, has called into being the unbeen, a magical liquid which consumes everything it touches and "once it is dreamed the stars themselves are in danger" (12). Prior to coming to his present world, Talking Man is aware of the power of this liquid to dissolve everything it touches. He also realizes that he can stop this catastrophe from happening. Thompson points out that an important part of the imagination in a folktale "is dependent upon the belief in magic" and that "the world is filled with objects which defy all the laws of nature and which obtain miraculous results without ordinary labor" (253). Such is the case as Talking Man puts the unbeen in a jar to hide it and flees along with an owl statue, for Dgene cannot follow him without it. He almost succeeds with his plan until he falls in love with his creation of the earth and decides to live there operating a junkyard in Kentucky. He also falls in love and marries Laurel Ann, an

aspiring country music singer.

All this action happens prior to the novel's first scene which begins sixteen years later with Talking Man living in peaceful bliss with Crystal, his sixteen-year old daughter, whose major concern is getting the tobacco planted. Laurel Ann died ten years earlier. A not-so-zealous college student, William Hendricks Tilden Williams, arrives at the junkyard to buy a windshield to replace a broken one on the Mustang which he has borrowed from his cousin. Also, Dgene arrives to reclaim the unbeen from her brother so she can open it and let the liquid destroy Talking Man's dream world. The story becomes a fantastic quest as Talking Man flees from Dgene and her gun-armed companions while Crystal and William hunt for Talking Man. Along with developing a unique circular journey quest where home is steeped in Southern tradition and popular culture is always at the heart, Bisson creates some intriguing character roles: Talking Man as a trickster who is a likeable con artist, William as a romantic hero whose chief aim is to help the damsel in distress, and Crystal as an empowered female who becomes the assertive, active woman.

Talking Man's physical appearance indicates his trickster nature which is exemplified by misdirection. He wears "a gray felt hat that was black at the front where he used the brim for a handle" (9-10). His

beguiling nature at trading and dealing with customers is abetted by this hat: "Perhaps it was hard, even impossible, to see his eyes under his hat, he was good at swapping things" (10). Actually, he acquires his name because he says nothing in the novel. When William tries to deal with Talking Man to acquire a windshield, he discovers the old man's taciturnity and his practice of communicating through Crystal. Bisson's humor intervenes and the characters become more "real" at this point when "William could see that this was one of those deals where a tall man was called Shorty or a fat man, Slim" (29).

His neighbors only hear him singing which William regards as "a wild high mournful singing unlike anything he had ever heard before" (36). Talking Man sings usually when he is out of sight working his magic. However, he is not portrayed as as a diabolic trickster, even in his seemingly sly business ways. His neighbors know his shortcomings, but they also respect his expertise in car and tractor mechanic work. This adds to the intrigue of his dual nature which is not typical of a wizard. Bainbridge in his comparison of hard science fiction, new wave science fiction and fantasy science fiction states that "a character who possesses magical powers does not need the technical competence prized by hard science" (145). However, Talking Man can float a car

in mid air as easily as he can fix a car's transmission.

He is good at fixing things. For example, he

could persuade a redbelly Ford tractor to start on a bone-cold February morning just by shaking a two-by-four at it, as if it were a smart mule... he could free a stuck valve by pouring pond water through a carburetor, set points with cigarette papers, and sharpen a chainsaw by passing the bar through a green-persimmon fire. . . . (10)

Bisson includes this type of mechanic's jargon throughout the novel as Talking Man performs one feat after another. It is a technology which Bisson knows well because he worked as an mechanic from 1972-77 (Contemporary Authors 35). In fact, he says "TALKING MAN is all about a Chrysler" (E-mail, 20 April 1995). The Chrysler is parked behind Talking Man's shop and is one of his treasured junks which William and Crystal later drive in their pursuit of him. It is "a red and white 1962 Chrysler New Yorker two-door hardtop with a red and white leatherette interior" which had "clear plastic dials standing upright on a black field, covered with a clear dome like a city in science fiction" (30-31). While the '62 Chrysler is a stereotypical junkyard antique, Dgene's automobile is not. Her transportation has a surreal appearance.

There "wasn't anything about it that was strange, yet there was nothing familiar" (55). Her weird car is a white two-door hardtop. It had a square rear deck like a Ford and a wide grille like a Pontiac. It had flush door handles, modest fins and a "dog corner" windshield in the fifties. It looked a little like every car, but not exactly like any kind of car. (55)

The contrast of the two automobiles, one ordinary and one fantastic, exemplifies Bisson's blend in telling a story by describing as in a montage a striking image which is a creative combination of the common to create the uncommon. Whether real or unreal, description of car mechanics is believable as he spins the yarn sometimes with humor and always with verisimilitude.

Talking Man's nature to con is also shown in how he is able to trick his neighbors into helping him with his tobacco crop. Following a very exacting, descriptive narrative of growing tobacco, Bisson relates how the scheming Talking Man does not actually grow his own tobacco plants:

Talking Man never actually grew tobacco plants, he just pretended to. In late February, he would stretch a piece of tobacco cloth on the hillside up against the woods, where it was easy to see from the road, and leave it there

until the middle of April. Then he would roll it up and put it away for next year. In late May, he would go around to the neighbors and pull enough plants to set his quarter of an acre. Nobody believed that Talking Man had actually tried and failed, but the spreading of the cloth showed his respect for appearances. Folks were glad to help him out, because they needed his help when the sun rode low in the sky and the tractors wouldn't start. (41)

The passage above serves as a good example of how Bisson gives realistic, commonplace attributes to an otherwise unreal character. Also, Bisson concludes the passage showing a tradition being handed down through the generations:

Crystal didn't like the system, but she had inherited it when she began to grow tobacco on her own. People respected the fact that she didn't like it, and liked the fact that she didn't try to change it. (41-42)

Although depicted as a likable Southern neighborly redneck, Talking Man is a wizard and much of his trickery is accomplished by magic. He only uses magic when he thinks no one is around. However, Crystal recalls as a youngster seeing cars floating through the air and woodstoves that stayed hot with no fire built in them.

She also recalls the fights between her mother and her father because of the magic. In fact, following his wife's death Talking Man performs no magical feats witnessed by anyone else until William arrives with the broken windshield.

Talking Man does not have a junk windshield to replace the broken one, so he uses magic by smearing a black mixture on it which miraculously repairs it. This is the first of many magical and fantastic feats which he begins to perform as he becomes involved in the odyssey to prevent Dgene from retrieving the unbeen. The trickster hides and then retrieves the unbeen which looks like moonshine in the oil pan of a wrecked '50 Ford four-door. He uses magic to make the Ford rise into the air. The Ford hangs "for a moment like a balloon on a short string, five feet off the ground" as the unbeen drains out in a Mason jar (60).

When Dgene arrives in Kentucky to reclaim the unbeen and Talking Man flees, he "borrows" the Mustang. Hence, William joins Crystal in the quest to follow her father. When the Mustang is shot into pieces by Dgene's companions, William continues the quest with Crystal. Talking Man then "borrows" a pickup truck from Hey Boss, a nightclub owner. In part, William continues the quest with Crystal because of his growing romantic feelings toward her. Moreover, he becomes an unlikely romantic

hero.

In her essay, "Romance: A Perdurable Pattern," Kathryn Hume details three stages which the romance hero experiences: equilibrium, struggle, and higher harmony. An investigation of these three stages as they relate to the character development and exploits of William enables the reader to appreciate Bisson's myth making. According to Hume, the three stages are given their respective names using "terminology meant to call attention to the state of the hero mentally and socially, not just to label his actions" (135).

In the first stage, equilibrium, the hero appears to be at peace. Prior to the borrowed Mustang's windshield being broken, William is taking a leisurely drive by his family's old homeplace. The accident results in William seeking out Crystal and Talking Man. His biggest adventure up to this point is playing the video game, Missile Command, while a student at Western Kentucky State College. In fact, becoming a master of "the game has taken most of his third semester" (24). According to Hume, "the relatively helpless or unthinking state of the hero at the onset is standard in romances, often effected by placing him in such high social rank that he has never had to do things for himself" (135). William is "from what his grandfather arrogantly (but accurately) described as the bourbon branch of a white whiskey family" (22).

Hume lists a number of ways the hero can be thrown into the action of the struggle. One way is for the hero to confront a calamity and another is to help a damsel in distress (135-36). William faces one calamity when he must have the windshield repaired and then he watches helplessly as Talking Man drives away in the borrowed Mustang. Hume adds that "love may be the agent which upsets the initial equilibrium" (136). William also desires to help Crystal find her father as he begins to be drawn to her romantically. The story is also about Crystal and William growing up and their attraction toward each other.

Regarding the second stage, Hume states "the struggle takes place in a special world . . . one ridden with magic and irrational forces" (136). When William joins Crystal in pursuit of Talking Man, his world suddenly becomes dangerous and surreal. He travels west and then north toward the North Pole. Along the way, the landscape suddenly changes and the travelers approach a six-mile wide Mississippi River Canyon and burning cities. William sees fishermen pulling in house-size, 1700-year-old monstrous catfish. Landmarks begin to appear alien and at one grocery store a sign reads, "PREMISES PROTECTED BY AN ARMED AMERICAN" (82). He is familiar with a world in which he can order a Hershey's Bar, a Reese's Cup, a Payday, a Mars Bar or a Nestle's

Crunch. However, this grocery store sells only candy bars with weird names like Collie Bar. Later, he enters a Stuckey's which "looked like it had been closed for a million years" (109). The scene is macabre with rabbits which lay dead in the glare of laser lights sweeping across the land, and the highway is blocked with burned cars. Motorists suddenly appear as pirates, and at the Canadian border they are met by wolves. But the most surreal landscape is that at the North Pole where Talking Man and Dgene meet at the world's end, the city of Edminidine where Destiny will be played out. Earlier Dgene has reclaimed the unbeen and the two are battling for the jar. When the jar falls, and the lid starts unscrewing, William sees the following scene which is reminiscent of Frank Baum's The Wizard of Oz when the Wicked Witch of the West starts to dissolve:

It rolled, feeding on itself, toward Dgene, crackling as it lapped around her bare feet. She fell folding as her feet dissolved. Her scream was not exactly a scream of pain. Her feet were gone, her arms that had caught her were short sticks. She scrambled to her knees and her knees were gone; she slid down on one disappearing side trying very hard to scream, but now there was nothing there to make the sound: no lungs, no throat, just her open mouth

and eyes and the unbeen rolling over her,
rolling over her. She was a dark shape in the
car-sized clear liquid, then just a shadow.

Two spots took longer to dissolve. (183)

William, who before joining Crystal in the quest to help Talking Man lives a passive life apparently sponging off his parents and cousin, becomes active as he assumes the role of romantic hero. Hume points out "that at some point the hero receives help . . . frequently magical or otherwise special. Occasionally the source of such aid is left unexplained or otherwise treated as luck" (137). Again, the novel fits to the pattern. For instance, every time the Chrysler's fuel gauge points to empty William is lucky and finds a service station. He also becomes resourceful using his dad's "borrowed" Mobil gas card. He not only buys gas but extra tires and batteries to resell so that he will have cash for food.

Hume further explains that the romantic hero may be aided by an animal (137). William uses his wit to cross the Canadian border with the aid of a caribou. However, in William's adventure the caribou is dead. When William and Crystal arrive at the border, they realize that the "border had been seeded with antipersonnel mines that are set off by any animal that isn't wearing a protective necklace" (146). William kills a caribou to get its protective necklaces, but he discovers that the necklace

is

a silver cable with a small green microchip encased in epoxy. William tried to cut the cable, but it just dulled the Buck knife. Neither of them wanted to saw off the caribou's head, so they pulled the whole animal up onto the hood. William leaned out the window and held one leg, so it wouldn't slide off, while Crystal drove slowly back through the trees to where the road ended. (147)

According to Hume, the romantic hero's most common goal is to face and defeat an adversary (137). In William's case, the adversary is the jar of unbeen. When William arrives at the North Pole with Crystal, Talking Man tells him to close the jar. He is afraid to touch the jar because he sees what the contents had done to Dgene. But he realizes that he must do it. When he picks up the jar, his hand brushes the unbeen, and the tips of two of his fingers disappear. He later courageously tries to rescue the owl statue because it is the only thing that will stop the unbeen from eating the world. Perhaps his crowning moment as a hero is when he follows Talking Man's wishes to take the jar home with him to Kentucky but not before Talking Man, whose physical body has half been eaten by the liquid unbeen, signals for William to shoot him. At this point, William

replaces Talking Man as Crystal's primary protector.

According to Hume, in the third stage the hero reaches a new equilibrium as he passes out of the special world back to his own. This stage of the hero's journey is first described in Joseph Campbell's The Hero with a Thousand Faces. Campbell details the path of the mythological adventure of the hero in the formula represented in the rites of passage--separation (departure), initiation, and return (30). The hero's departure is often aided by magic and when he returns to his own land, he becomes the Master of Two Worlds (229). When William returns to Kentucky, he in essence becomes master of two worlds. He marries Crystal, has a daughter with her, raises tobacco, and lives "happily ever after" (192). He is also the new keeper of the jar of unbeen.

While Bisson develops William as a hero, he also shows Crystal to be an empowered woman of sixteen. Part of her and Talking Man's livelihood is raising tobacco, and she is the one who is in charge of seeing the neighbors for the tobacco plants and driving the John Deere tractor to plow the fields. When Talking Man flees with Dgene in pursuit, it is Crystal who makes the decision to follow and bring Talking Man back home. While on their journey, it is Crystal who sometimes makes the daredevil decisions to continue. For example, she assumes the assertive role while driving. At one point when William lets her drive

he suddenly notices that the speedometer is on 112. The reader is told: "He had never gone this fast before. Much less with a girl driving" (162).

From the onset when William and Crystal first meet, they are attracted to one another. However, it is the empowered Crystal who initiates their first kiss. She does this by blocking him from passing in a close quarter and saying, "toll bridge" (171). Moments earlier William wants to kiss her but falters. Crystal's gesture causes him to react, not only as he wants but as she wants.

While the novel is a fantasy of the exploits of a trickster, a romantic hero and an empowered female, it is also a narrative grounded in Southern tradition and popular culture. Writing about Talking Man Paul Kincaid points out "however far the quest might take them, at the heart of the novel is a sense of the South as home . . . and a refuge which is reclaimed at the end of the novel" (62). The novel's rural setting is a landscape marked by familiar Southern scenery: junkyards, John Deere tractors, tobacco fields and hound dogs. It is a combination of Bisson's ordinary amid a landscape of magical feats and weird happenings such as snow in the summer.

Also, there is a sense of history as the rural landscape represents not only the past but the future. The junkyards attest to the past and the dead end of technology while the tobacco fields are a symbol of what

each spring will bring to the land. Owensboro, the nearest town to Crystal and Talking Man, is described as a whiskey town, a tobacco town, and a river town. Its timelessness and permanence are marked by a sassafras tree. The tree is the town's

oldest inhabitant, the largest sassafras tree on the planet, older than anyone even suspects, which was a seedling 20 thousand years ago when the river ran cold with melting ice and children's fathers still told stories about hunting buffalo with tusks who hunted men back.

(52)

Adding to the atmosphere and sense of home is the sound of country music which always seems to be playing. When William first meets Crystal and she tells him her name, she also tells him that it is "after the country singer [Crystal Gayle] and sister of Loretta Lynn, who her mother had met once" (30). A Conway Twitty song is playing on the radio when two key plot twists occur: when the Mustang's windshield is broken and when William enters Talking Man's shop after Crystal confides all to him about her father's wizardry. When they enter the Night Owl Club looking for Talking Man, Dickie Lee's "Nine Million, Nine Hundred Ninety-Nine Thousand, Nine Hundred Ninety-Nine Tears to Go" is playing. On the quest for Talking Man, William notices that all the cars

have tuned their radios to the same station which is playing Jeannie Pruitt's song, "Satin Sheets." At one point in the journey as he drives farther and farther from home, he thinks about how "country music makes people who have never even left home homesick" (91). The landscape becomes more surreal further into the quest, and William starts to have dreams. In one he dreams of a fiddle player balancing on the edge of a half bridge high in the clouds while playing, "The Orange Blossom Special." Later, he dreams that he is listening to the radio. Chuck Berry was singing "Maybelline," but it was in Russian and the radio was on fire. He woke up in a cold sweat. Something was wrong. (161)

This happens after Dgene has retrieved the unbeen from Talking Man, and he joins up with William and Crystal in the Chrysler to go to the North Pole.

From having a classic Chuck Berry song sung in a foreign language to a wizard fixing an oil pan with magic, Bisson's Talking Man combines the commonplace with the fantastic in surprising turns where the real and the unreal meet. Using humor and imagination, Bisson colorfully depicts both of Talking Man's roles--as a junkyard dealer and as a creator of the world, an oxymoron that could only be found in the fantasy world of science fiction.

From Kemen's fantastic adventures with bizarre foes to the sometimes comic antics of the likable wizard, Talking Man, Bisson's first two novels contain both convention and invention representative of the fantasy form within the science fiction genre.

Chapter V

Alternate History

Fire on the Mountain

As noted in chapter two, the New Wave movement within the science fiction genre sought stylistic innovations in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and the alternate history format often provided a narrative frame. Bisson's third novel, Fire on the Mountain (1988), is an alternate history account of John Brown's raid in 1859, which according to Bisson, was "really the beginning of the Civil War" (E-mail, 20 April 1995). According to him, "Politically Fire represents my belief that America would look very different (better) if African Americans had been compensated for their several generations of unpaid labor" (E-mail, 20 April 1995).

Bisson's novel falls within a tradition which a number of critics have discussed. Alvin Toffler applauds science fiction writers who deal with alternative world and alternative vision possibilities because this type of story "widens our repertoire of possible responses for change" and because it helps us "to see the world or a system as a whole" and "helps us to think of history in very large sweeps, rather than puny slices" (118). James Gunn in his introductory notes to selections in The Road to Science Fiction points out that Robert Silverberg traced the alternative history story to Edward Everett Hale's "Hands

Off," which was first published in Harper's Magazine in 1898 (193). The story proposes what might have happened if Joseph had not been sold into slavery. Tracing the development of this genre, Gunn notes that J. C. Squire published a volume titled If It Had Happened Otherwise: Lapses Into Imaginary History in 1931 which consisted of eleven essays previously published in Scribner's Magazine (193). "Among the titles were 'If Lee Had Won the Battle of Gettysburg,' 'If Booth Had Missed Lincoln,' and 'If Napoleon Had Escaped to America'" (193). According to Aldiss in "Alternate Worlds and Alternate Histories," "If Lee Had Won the Battle of Gettysburg" by Winston Churchill introduced American history to the alternate history genre which led to Ward Moore's Bring the Jubilee in 1953 (13).

Sheldon Teitelbaum points out that alternate history even has subgenres which include historical events such as War World II, the American Civil War, and the Kennedys (8). To show this scope of events, Gunn lists the best examples of the genre starting with Moore's Bring the Jubilee, which is about the South winning the Civil War (193). Gunn continues the list with the following novels:

Philip K. Dick's The Man in the High Castle (1962) [which assumes] the Axis powers won World War II and divided up the United States.

Pavane (1968) by Keith Powers (1935-) presents a world that hasn't undergone the Industrial Revolution because Queen Elizabeth was assassinated in 1588. In Harry Harrison's A Transatlantic Tunnel, Hurrah (1972) George Washington was shot and the American Revolution never happened. (194)

Robert Scholes and Eric Rabkin further explain the significance of the alternate history genre:

The alternate time stream at its most serious raises questions about history and progress that are not so accessible to any other fictional form. Above all, this form emphasizes the way that the actual events of history have shaped cultural values which we sometimes take to be absolute. (177)

In Bisson's account of Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry, Brown succeeds and starts a slave rebellion. After the war, a new utopian republic, Nova Africa, is formed. It is a land that enjoys economic growth, positive technological progress and a sense of freedom. Nova Africa is juxtaposed next to the U.S.A., now the U.S.S.A. (the United Socialist States of America), which finally enjoys prosperity after decades of under development and civil wars. Critic John Clute states that Fire on the Mountain is more a vision than a novel and that it is "less an

alternate history than a claim for allegiance" ("From Eon" 8). Clute continues, "It asks of its readers to pledge their imaginations to this dream of an American magically cleansed and calm and rich" (8). Clute also says concerning what he calls "the delicate wishfulness" of the novel, that "the remoteness of that world from ours only increases the pathos of the fable" and that "within its exceedingly frail pages, the dream obtains" (8).

David Ketterer in his study, New Worlds for Old: The Apocalyptic Imagination, Science Fiction, and American Literature, discusses the utopias and dystopias found in science fiction. Ketterer says that while the American imagination appears obsessed with dreams of a utopia, that "American society is, in fact, a projected utopia that now seems to have turned into a dystopia" (23). Many of the dystopias have dealt with America's fall from grace along the lines Leo Marx describes in The Machine in the Garden which points to the culprits as the industrial revolution and the growth of technology (cited in Ketterer 23). Bisson answers this with his utopian novel presenting nature-friendly, innovative uses of technology. In a paper delivered as one of the keynote addresses at the annual Conference of the Southern Humanities Council in 1993, Bisson comments on how his love for science fiction molded his literary pursuit and ultimately his creation of a literary utopia. He affirms:

We learned a little about science. But oddly enough, we learned a lot about literature. Even from this scorned sub-literature. We learned what literature could do. That it could lift the heart. That it could teach and tell and signify. That it could soar. ("Science Fiction and the Apollo Blues")

Bisson's alternate history story which soars and signifies opens with Yasmin Abraham Martin Odingen as she is on her way to Harper's Ferry to deliver her great-grandfather's papers to be read at the hundredth anniversary of the successful attack. She is crossing the Appalachian border that divides the socialized U.S.S.A. from Nova Africa. Bisson opens with an alternate history plot within the novel's plot itself. To prepare for this alternate historical plot twist, Bisson explains in the prologue that Brown's attack was originally planned to be carried out on Independence Day. Because one of the architects of the plan, Harriet Tubman, was sick and because much needed supplies were late arriving, the raid was then delayed until October. As the story opens, paradoxically, it is Yasmin who has been delayed for three months. It is 1959, and she is following the wishes of her great-grandfather's instructions to have the papers telling of his involvement in the rebellion read fifty years after he has written them.

Yasmin has been delayed because she had stayed an extra three months in Africa to finish the Olduval Project (2). Her sincerity to make the trip is observed in the opening pages of the novel:

A fax has been sent to the museum director, but it wasn't the same. Now she was bringing the original, according to the old man's will, in the stiff old pill-smelling doctor's bag that had held them for the thirty-six years since he had died (the year she was born), hoping maybe that it would make it up to him. (2)

The story is also about Yasmin's present day emotional upheaval. The media are filled with accounts of the attempts of cosmonauts to land on Mars. This is a poignant reminder to her of her husband's death five years earlier during an unsuccessful Mars mission. Also, she will soon be united with her daughter, Harriet, and her "ring mother," Pearl, with whom she must share the news that she is pregnant and that the father is her African lover. Burdened with her present day dilemma and her dutiful task for her great-grandfather, Abraham, she travels with Harriet to the Harper's Ferry Museum to deliver the historical papers. At the museum they are welcomed by Scott Grissom, the director, who gives them letters of Doctor Thomas Hunter, the abolitionist doctor for whom Abraham was an apprentice, to read.

In the introductory pages Bisson also paints a landscape of what this utopian world is like because of Brown's fateful rendezvous with history. As Yasmin approaches Roanoke on her way to the museum to present the papers, she encounters buffalo. She muses:

There was no hurrying the great herds that paced the continent's grassy corridors, east to west; they always had the right-of-way across highways and even borders. These were heading south and west toward Cumberland Gap where even the mountains would stand aside to let them pass. (2)

Her serene description of the environment also includes technology: "She heard more singing and reached over to scan the radio up, but it was the Atlanta-Baltimore airship, the silver-and-orange John Brown, motoring grandly past in the lee of the mountains" (2). Yasmin's twelve-year-old daughter, Harriet, is also enchanted by the airships which move harmoniously in the environment. When she watches the Tom Paine pass by her just a few hundred feet away, the scene is described along with its effect upon Harriet:

There was silence like the eye of a storm as the ship passed, the plasma motors sounding farther away the closer they were. Harriet loved airships, and seeing the ship pass so closely, actually looking slightly down on it, made her

feel lucky, like walking up on a deer. (142-43)

Along with the airships are other technological advances which are in tune with nature. Two of these are growstone and living shoes. The growstone, in contrast to today's cold concrete and steel, is a durable material which is also organically friendly. The growstone is "softer than balsa wood but stronger than concrete" (45). Growstone is something which Harriet liked to peel as did all kids because "it flaked off satisfyingly in thumbnail-shaped moons" (45). Harriet is described as amusing herself as she flakes off a bridge rail only to watch it grow back smooth again. She also wears "living shoes" which are a user-friendly product resulting from space technology. When Harriet touches them, the shoes have a life of their own: "They dropped to the floor, where they nestled together so they wouldn't get separated" (166).

This utopian landscape is contrasted at the novel's end with a passage from a seemingly fictitious novel, John Brown's Body, which was published in the 1920's. Harriet reads and is captivated and astonished by the "alternate history" detailed in the book. In contrast to the environment in which she lives, she reads from the book to her mother:

"The Mexicans wipe out the buffalo, string the country together with railroads and barbwire, annihilate, not just defeat, the Sioux, the Crow,

the Cheyenne, the Apache, one after the other. Genocide is celebrated by adding stars to the flag." (154)

Yasmin reacts to the passage by saying, "The author would have all of history hanging on one stand of rope with poor old Captain Brown" (154-55). Within this play of alternate history within history, Bisson adds an ironic note by having Harriet exclaim, "That's why I don't like science fiction. It's always junk like that. I'll take the real world, thanks" (155).

Yasmin's story about her endeavor to journey with Harriet to the Harper Ferry's Museum to present her great-grandfather's papers is told along with two other narratives. According to Bisson, "Structurally, it was very complicated with three different voices (a man, a woman, and an old man writing about when he was a boy)" (E-mail, 20 April 1995). The voice of a man is that of Dr. Thomas Hunter, and the woman's voice is that of Yasmin. The third voice is that of Abraham when he was a ten-year-old slave at the time of John Brown's attack.

Abraham's and Thomas Hunter's narratives are presented through memoirs and letters respectively, which Yasmin and Harriet read while at the museum. Since Abraham is a slave and Dr. Hunter is an abolitionist, they experience the outcome of Brown's raid from two different viewpoints. Hunter's letters reveal his

transformation from a man who opposes Brown to one who joins in the rebellion. In a letter to his friend, Emily Penn, he admits his loyalty to the Brown rebellion and refers to the fire on the mountain (hence the novel's title) which burns to symbolize the cause:

People here never look up, fearing what they will see: the beacon light on the Blue Ridge to the east; another on the Cumberlands to the west. It's like being afraid of the stars. . . . From here the fire on the mountain dominates heaven. I alone of the whites in Staunton look up-but secretly. I have already had some success in getting medical supplies up the mountain.
(147-48)

Within this fictional letter in an alternate history novel, Bisson includes real historical figures in order to give credibility to his fabricated story. Hunter writes to Emily in the same letter, "The poet Whitman has gone South to join Brown. . . . In Concord Emerson and Thoreau are not speaking, having ignited their own Civil War to match the one raging through the Abolitionish movement in general" (147).

Abraham's narrative starts when he is twelve years old, when it "all started on the Fourth of July, 1859" (5). Rather like many slave narratives do, Bisson creates a dual perspective including the thoughts of a young slave boy

and the man he becomes. For example, in one memoir he comments on a horse: "His name was Caesar, which I spelled in my mind, "Sees Her," for I had not yet formed that acquaintance with the classics which was to enrich my later years" (15). As a young slave, he observes firsthand the failing attempts by the whites to defeat Brown and his followers. In Abraham's account of what happened in the 1850's, Bisson also takes the opportunity to portray historical accounts in an "alternate" context. For example, whites who were part of "The Lost Cause" was loyal to Abraham Lincoln who is depicted as "a Whig, backed by U.S. capital, who had organized a fifth column of Southern whites to support an invasion of Nova Africa in 1870" and who had supported the position that if "the whites couldn't keep the slaves, they at least wanted the land back" (70).

Dr. Hunter's last letter reveals how he and Abraham cross paths. The two meet when Abraham decides to join Brown's rebellion and rides with a load of medical supplies which the doctor is delivering to the men in Brown's forces. Abraham, who initially had stolen Hunter's gun, helps him as an apprentice. Hunter encourages the youth to study medicine. In the letter, he writes: "He has made a lengthy passage along with the rest of his people, from slavery to a new nation, independent, with liberty and justice for (truly) All" (162).

In his review of the novel for the New York Times Review, Gerald Jonas refers to Bisson's alternate history account as "playful speculations" because he is "suggesting that we would all be living in utopia but for one small setback in the War Between Good and Evil nearly 130 years ago" (13). However, John Clute affirms, "Within its pages, we can be joyous, for a space" (8). Edgar Vernon McKnight, Jr., in his study, Alternate History: The Development of a Literary Genre, affirms that "tying his utopia to a specific historical event" Bisson African-Americans "the chance denied by history to demonstrate their potential" (183).

Brian McHale in his discussion of alternate worlds suggests that "such a story invites the reader to compare the real state of affairs in our world with the hypothetical state of affairs projected for the parallel world" (61). This also validates Geertz's concept of genre blurring discussed in chapter two. Of all science fiction forms, the alternate history account most blurs the genre. Critic and author Charles Platt affirms: "Alternate histories have a non-fiction appeal. . .because they have real history wrapped up in them. Overall, there's been a general trend in the last 20 years in book publishing toward fiction which has a more documentary flavor" (Treitelbaum E8).

Indeed, Bisson creates a historical account of modern America with buffalo, pleasing airships in the

airways, nature-inspired shoes and freedom in a utopia that poignantly asks the question of an alternate history work--what if? Like his short stories that blur the science fiction genre into social and philosophical arenas, the questions posed by this novel make the reader ponder real social issues dealing with the environment, racism and encroaching technology.

Chapter VI

Space Travel

Voyage To the Red Planet and Pirates of the Universe

In his keynote address at the 1993 Annual Conference of the Southern Humanities Council, Bisson says that the one great virtue of science fiction's "Golden Age" was that "at the heart of it all was the dream of space travel. This was what Brian Aldiss called sf's major chord" ("Science Fiction and the Post-Apollo Blues" 8). Space travel was very much a part of the early hard-core science fiction as it is in Bisson's fourth and fifth novels. The fourth, Voyage to the Red Planet, is about a trip to Mars, and the fifth, Pirates of the Universe, has the protagonist traveling from earth to outer space into virtual reality worlds. Both novels serve as examples of Bisson's skill of incorporating conventions of hard-core science fiction along with imaginative inventive plots and characterization.

Bisson explains his intent in writing Voyage to the Red Planet in the address:

Several years ago, after writing three novels, two of them fantasy and one an alternate history, and finding myself accepted to some extent by both readers and my fellow writers, I decided to write a conventional, old fashioned, real if you

will, science fiction novel.

What about? A trip to Mars. What else?

. . . Voyage is on one level at least an actual science fiction adventure about the first steps onto another planet. (10)

However, the novel is also a satirical comedy that makes a statement about the present. Once again Bisson's narration not only fulfills the characteristics of the science fiction genre but also becomes an instrument of social criticism. According to Glen E. Cox in his review of the novel, "Bisson's proposal in Voyage to the Red Planet may be hidden by a standard SF adventure plot, but it is as cutting as Swift's ever was." The 21st century world which Bisson creates in the novel is one in which the United States government has sold off various departments to pay off the national debt. For example, NASA has been sold to Disney, and the Nixon Orbital Space Station is a theme park. Hence, greedy corporations are in control of politics. At the heart of Bisson's original, witty space adventure is the spaceship, the Mary Poppins, built in secret twenty years earlier jointly by the United States and Russia prior to the market crash. The ship has been hidden behind a screen of nuclear waste and only 618 people know about it. The only business on earth with funds to man a mission to Mars is a film industry. Thus, enters Pellucidar Pictures and

Leonard W. Markson, a movie producer who is one of the few people who knows that the ship is actually finished and hidden in orbit. True to today's con-artist stereotypes of movie moguls, Markson talks two of the original Mars astronauts, a Russian and an American, into piloting the spaceship.

Natasha Alyosha Katerina Ivanovna Kirov is the Russian astronaut, and Bisson's physical description of her as she observes herself in a mirror is all-telling:

In the mirrors of the Stalin Lounge she saw a woman alone and at peace for perhaps the last time for three years: blond, with china-blue eyes, hair more white than yellow, pale muscular arms. As Russian as the ship. As ready to be off. (56)

Bisson gives this female prominence making her the commander of the Mary Poppins. Bass is the American astronaut and is Bisson's southern tie-in to the novel, a characteristic prevalent in most of his work. The reader first meets Bass, a tobacco-chewing Kentuckian, as he is feeding his hound dogs. True to other Bisson work where old-fashioned know-how is important, the novel includes his knowledge of cars and engines which he gained in his experience as a mechanic. Even in outer space, Bass is the character who comes to the rescue to fix the spaceship using "shade tree" mechanics. Explaining to

Kirov what he is doing, Bass says, "I learned this trick from a NASA hot rodder in Huntsville" (218). His down-home humor always reminds the reader that he is a real-life character amidst a cast of misfits. For example, it is Bass's standard joke when a spacecraft is ready to take off to ask, "Think this thing'll fly?" (31). He was fired by a major airline when he once asked this question with the cabin speakers on prior to a takeoff. Bass is also the character who at the novel's end is the hero because he stays behind on Mars so the spaceship will not be overloaded. He does this despite Kirov's desire to "overrule this John Wayne sacrifice" (218).

Markson blackmails Dr. J. C. Jeffries, the Second Medical Officer on the original Mars mission, to be the ship's doctor. Jeffries is described as what "some say brilliant and all say ambitious young Howard University Naval ROTC M. D." who "suddenly resigned his commission and dropped out of sight" (22). He has built a successful practice in Hollywood offering Career Spacing. According to his brochure, the technique is a

medically proven life extension program that can enhance, prolong and creatively expand your active career. Used in strictest confidence by athletes, artists, entertainers, many of the top film and television artists in the USA and around the world. (21)

Markson discovers that the Career Spacing procedure is actually a process known as hibernation trigger which was originally developed while Jeffries was assigned to the Navy's orbital station. Markson blackmails Jeffries to join the crew because he knows that the doctor has been using the process's HT serum without paying royalties.

William Bainbridge affirms that "much of the best science fiction tries to find and share insights about our age of space, computers, genetic engineering, and atomic doom" (7). He further points out that this quest "may not often be victorious in the philosophical struggle, but at least it grapples with the problems" (7). Bisson extrapolates the present day Hollywood crowd's quest for the fountain of youth via face lifts, tummy tucks, and miracle creams through the HT serum.

According to a press release about the process:

the Mars Voyagers' intake and elimination will drop to zero, aging will almost cease, respiration will drop to less than 12 percent of normal...the bone and muscle deterioration feared in a long voyage at zero g is prevented, since HT is known to trigger a calcium and protein fixer that preserves the muscle tone of the bear, the King of the Forest. (80)

Also, the press release says that the serum is "extracted from the frozen urine of the now-extinct *Ursus horribilis*,

the legendary grizzly bear that once roamed the Rocky Mountains of the US and Canada" (80). The serum is the cure-all that not only cuts out the boredom of the three-year trip to Mars and back but also reduces the aging process for the two celebrity movie stars, Beverly Glenn and Fonda-Fox, who are traveling to Mars to film the movie.

Bisson again uses satire as movie stars are regarded as royalty and, like present-day monarchs, can only enter the ranks of celebrity through blood-lines. In fact, Beverly Glenn's perfect body is "a tribute to the genetic engineering the Academy made available to its hereditary members" (60). Similar to her counterparts in present day Hollywood, Beverly Glenn is not accessible as she remains a facade because the HT serum overworks and causes her to sleep for most of the voyage. Like Glenn, Fonda-Fox's "face was wonderfully familiar, his features a montage of four generations of Hollywood, evoking the shared pleasures of three hundred million Americans" (60).

Joining the crew is the cinematographer, Glamour, who is described in grotesque fashion as: "a red-haired, red-bearded, three-foot seven-inch midget in a \$1,700 butter-leather jacket" (32). Markson persuades Glamour to be the cameraman because he will be shooting with the latest technology, the Demogorgon. This revolutionary camera has special editing features with

its awesome memory bank, internal self-editing capabilities, tachyon delays and video loops, the digitizer completely freed the image on the screen from the real world that "sent" it...to be later dimensionalized and dithered and screebed, made older or younger, turned left or right, kissed or killed depending on the storyline. . . . (165)

Here Bisson again is able to make a social comment on how encroaching technology dehumanizes. Fonda-Fox and Glenn are members of the Guild which gives them acting privileges. The Demogoron reduces "the actor to nothing more than a prop to be booked in a variety of poses and settings" and if "it weren't for the Guild, there wouldn't be any need at all for Movie Stars or even actors" (165).

Along with Kirov, Bass, Glamour, Glenn and Fonda-Fox is an unexpected passenger, a stowaway teenage girl, named Greetings Brother Buffalo, after her hippie grandmother. Greetings is at the space station where the crew docks for the voyage because she has won a week's vacation for having the weirdest name. The crew later discovers that she has sneaked aboard the spaceship uninvited. But Greetings gains fame with a turn of fate by joining the filming. When Glenn does not wake up, Markson searches to find a former actor who may be related to Greetings so that she can be in the movie certifiably. The Demogoron

makes a composite of Greetings' image with Glenn's and a new star is born for the movie, Noreena Pellucidar. Ironically, at the novel's beginning, Greetings is unique and has a strong self-identity because of her name. At the novel's end, she gives up this identity for the fame of being part of a composite on a movie screen.

Another major character who never leaves earth but who plays a major role in the voyage is Sweeney, the mission designer who plots the path for the voyage. However, his performance of his duties go awry because of money problems. He gets a second job on earth so that he can "borrow" a company's computer in order to relay information to the voyagers. He calls from bars and then finally calls collect to relay needed information to Kirov. To the horror of the ship's crew, they watch via video as Sweeney is arrested for stealing computer time. Regardless, he does his job and provides the crew with directives for a safe journey home.

David Ketterer in his study of the apocalyptic imagination, science fiction and American literature claims that "in a sense, the exploration of space has supplied American with a further outlet for its tradition of frontiersmanship" (23). Ketterer adds that America's fall from grace as described by Leo Marx in The Machine and the Garden is attributed to the Industrial Revolution and the growth of technology. Out of the mouth of Markson, Bisson

shows a hideous role of technological power. Markson says regarding his plan to travel to Mars to film a movie:

"No government in the world could afford such a venture as I propose--not since the Grand Depression. No, I represent something quite different. An industry that has the vision to undertake such a voyage. The ability to make it happen. And the money to finance it--" (15)

Again in the physical description of Markson, Bisson indicates the phony facade of the mogul as he is shown on a video screen: "the image of a man in a distressed semisilk sport coat standing in front of a large wondawalnut desk" (58).

To further describe the phony scene, Bisson adds satirically that through a window on a mountainside and from Markson's office, a sign reads-- HOL YWOOD (58). Bisson uses the visual deletion of the "l" in Hollywood to ironically show the state of affairs with society's infatuation of the filming industry, worshipping it with religious fervor. M. Darrol Bryant in his study, "Cinema, Religion, and Popular Culture," focuses attention on the movie industry and religion and argues that films are technological artifacts with spiritual aims. He compares the dream of the film to that of the alchemist and shows how they are analogous as both strive "to overcome time, to achieve immortality" (103). Bryant states:

In this perspective the phenomenon of film is one means by which the technological civilization realizes its alchemical dream. Here in the cinema, the "stuff" of everyday life can be taken up and magically transformed; base metals are turned to gold. At the same time, the culture gains a certain immortality for itself by lifting its own contents--persons, objects, ideology--beyond the flux of every day to the permanence of the filmed image. In the cinema, then, we have confirmed the popular belief that the everyday world we endure, itself shaped by technological civilization, is capable of achieving its noble but hidden dream: the transmutation and deification of the world.

(103)

Bisson examples this perspective in his treatment of the "HOL YWOOD" sign in which the "flux of every day" is transformed to film which then becomes exalted.

Bisson successfully creates a hard science fiction space adventure which according to Gareth Rees is "a technologically literate nuts-and-bolts description of a Mars mission that would put the most fervent Analog writer to shame" and that "has all the jargon, the distances, speeds and physics down pat, and his descriptions of spaceflight, space vehicles and space technology are

detailed and entirely believable" (1). Clute and Nicholls in the Encyclopedia of Science Fiction agree and add "the ship and voyage both described with considerable verisimilitude--evoke a powerful sense of genuine but wasted opportunity. . .a sense that humanity's dream of traveling outward was not yet, perhaps over" (127).

Scientifically, Bisson describes the ship's departure: "The Mary Poppins left Earth with an initial velocity, from delta V, of 38,867 mph, corrected to 37,677, holding to precise 38,786 at the beginning of Venus Transit" (Voyage 111). He also uses objective language to describe on the label the mode of transportation to be used on Mars: "Isuzu: one three-wheeled all-terrain vehicle (ATV): reciprocating plastic hydrogen engine: 1,200 cc" (173). The landscape of Mars and its volcanoes is also described in specific details: "'Pavonis Mons'. . .'Arsia Mons' (three hundred miles to the left of it, and more flat topped); 'Ascareus Mons' (three hundred miles north, its flanks rougher and more mountainous" (138).

One of the minor themes interwoven in this space adventure is one of First Contact. Claeson in his selection, "Toward A History of Science Fiction," states that in "space opera the alien was merely a displaced Indian in the adaptation of the western to galactic dimensions" (16). The alien in Bisson's novel is more of

a hologram with which Jeffries and then Bass have contact. The holo figure resides in the center of a silver pyramid and changes appearances. Although the figure tries to communicate, it is unsuccessful, and Jeffries and Bass decide that they have discovered an exhibit of some ancient ruin. Later Jeffries concludes that the aliens are genetic engineers and clarifies what the ruins are. He describes one of the holo displays:

. . .the DNA of what we identified later as a small primate was dipped into some kind of solution that reverse eleven of its amino acids. The result, according to this holo, was the genetic coding for the language and imagization [sic] center in humans. In other words, that the primate apparently was our--" (231)

Kirov completes his statement by adding "Adam," but he replies, "Eve, actually" (231).

Eric Rabkin believes that "the rhetoric of science has come to dominate fiction as the source for authority" (qtd. in Peters 117). In his study of the rhetorics of art and science in science fiction, Peters points out that writers "use a variety of techniques to persuade us that their narrative worlds are true to the human condition" (117). While Bisson does incorporate the rhetoric of science throughout the novel, his unique technique of combining art and science is often used to depict images

and scenes. For example, Bisson's description of gravity meshes science and art:

If the ship had been unfolded (the umbrella opened) going into the slow spin necessary to stabilize temperatures, the centrifugal force toward the ends of the outflung hab cylinders would have provided a light simulation of gravity....Gravity was, as the stowaway had put it, "a drag." With the cylinders still folded along the axis, the spin provided only a fractional whisper of weight, so that the sleepers floated like butterflies amid the kudzu.... (82)

Here Bisson combines the scientific term centrifugal force with two of his favorite images of nature, the butterfly and the kudzu vine so that the objective and the subjective come together. Symbolically, the kudzu is also a vine which dominates as it searches for more space.

H. G. Wells states that the writer's objective is to "domesticate the impossible hypothesis" (qtd. in Parringer 58). In order to accomplish this task, Bisson combines the familiar of popular culture art with the space technology to set up his narrative world. Throughout the narrative, there is an ironic reference to actual individuals, icons, images, and other pop art

items which are familiar to the reader, as seen in the following examples. While in the voyage, a comment is made that they have ET separation, Bass and Glamour say at the same time, "ET phone home" (39). The Orange County Airport in California is known as John Wayne International. Aboard the Mary Poppins the crew awakes to the Everly Brothers' hit song, "Wake Up, Little Susie" (93). Jeffries is referred to as a doctor "Black, like Dr. Huxtable" alluding to the popular Bill Crosby situation comedy. When Markson hired a young man to be Greetings' boyfriend in order to get more press coverage, she explains that "It's like The Dating Game" (99). Just as the crew sees Mars, Chuck Berry's voice is heard over the ship's speaker singing,

"Hello, operator,/ give me Tidewater
4-10-0-0/Tell the folks back home it's the
promised land calling/and the poor boy's on
the line.... (113)

Greetings watches Family Ties and Gone With the Wind. As the space ship descends down toward Mars, Jeffries says, "And may the force be with us all" (132). After the successful Mars landing, Johnny Carson, Jr., invites them to his show and Vice-President Kennedy invites them to the White House (158). Bisson continues throughout the novel to delight the reader with word play of familiar references. In the closing scene at the Academy Awards

where the movie, Voyage to the Red Planet, is nominated for the best film, Loretta Spielberg-Stallone and Woody Farrah-Close are the presenters (236).

Bisson's Voyage to the Red Planet certainly makes Allen Ginsberg's statement "we're all in science fiction now" (qtd. in Dick) ring true. In today's world where movie celebrities are more revered and recognizable than noted persons in politics and high, responsible places, Bisson's proposal that the first human to step foot on Mars be a movie star with the mission to act in the greatest film of all time does not sound so far fetched. Ironically, Bisson closes the novel with a scene in which reality and fiction blur into one. Fonda-Fox is at the Academy Awards and awaiting the announcement of the best film award. The narrator comments about the movie star: "He had never doubted how the voyage would turn out, but this was real life, and the suspense was killing him" (236).

Likewise, the protagonist, Gunther Ryder, in Pirates of the Universe finds himself both in a real and unreal existence as he lives in three different worlds--on earth, in outer space, and in virtual reality adventures. Bisson originally wanted to entitle the novel about Gun's quest Peteys. However, according to the author in an interview, "My editor wouldn't accept Peteys as the title. He said we need a better title" (June 15, 1996). Bisson said at that point he decided to create the "absolute dumbest

science fiction title" that he could think of. He decided upon Pirates of the Universe and then according to him, "I had to justify the title and so then I thought of the idea of having a theme park called Pirates of the Universe."

This orbital live-in theme park is open to a privileged few including fully vested Disney-Windows employees. It is the 21st century, and Gunter is from Earth, which is war-torn and depleted of resources. Hence, he jumps at the opportunity to become a Disney ranger to hunt Petseys, large one-molecule-thick jellyfish-like creatures whose skin has become the most valuable currency on Earth. As the novel opens, Gun is only one Petey hunt away from becoming a resident at the coveted theme park where he plans for his hometown sweetheart, Donna, to join him.

Reminiscent of a cross between Walt Disney World and 20th century suburbia, the Pirates of the Universe theme park is described as a desirable place to live:

There was the Mouse, from the front, his smile crafty but benign. There was the Duck. There were the lakes filled with water and ringed with sunlit cabins and condos; the streets, curved in a gentle grid, neither straight nor twisted but something perfectly in between. From here, the newspapers on the front lawns, the birds fluttering in the

birdbaths, the kids on tricycles all looked perfect, and perfectly desirable. Each house was surrounded by maple trees (no palms, no locusts); each sidewalk led to a porch overlooked by a white door with a triangular glass window. Overhead there was no dome, for it had been replaced with real sky, and the grass was a green as clover. Children played in the streets. . . . (181-82)

However, the novel goes beyond a single level quest adventure. Described as a "multileveled commentary on how pulp dreams survive in a disintegrating reality" (qtd. in HotWired), the novel has characters interacting within three worlds. In an interview Bisson describes the novel's setting in cinematic terms:

Pirates is really built around three or four big set pieces.... One of the things I had was the image of these big things floating through the universe, the Petey's.... I had wanted to do Moby Dick. I wanted to do a thing about somebody hunting these things. . . and the conflict involved. (June 15, 1996)

This set is located in space at Orlando. Part of this setting includes Overworld, another Disney-Windows orbital theme park. However, this park is not as desirable as Pirates. Nanobots are in control of part of the Overworld

and have built a defensive section called the Tangle. While the Overworld is colorful, the Tangle is only gray. Bisson describes it as "a gray gray, a gray that repelled rather than drew the eye. It was hard to see from the outside, with its annihilating unsheen" (31).

The second set involves Gun's hometown, Morgan's Ferry, located at K-T which was once Kentucky and Tennessee. K-T is now a free-trade zone operated by the Danes. After the major three powers ceased war on Earth, America was auctioned off, and the Danes purchased the "cheap cities around edges of the free-enterprise zone" (100). In an interview Bisson describes his creation of K-T:

Another sort of image or complex of images presented itself to me which was the whole idea of coming back to the idea of K-T, the idea of there being this. . .discorporated section of America that had been unincorporated and then. . .an unstated environmental disaster where everything is. . .flooded and there is no oil and . . .a post apocalyptic thing. (June 15, 1996)

It is at K-T that the reader meets Gun's family and girlfriend Donna. Among the family members are his father, Ham; his uncle, Hump; his foster mother/big sister, Iris; his moronic cousin, Glenn; and his radical/fugitive brother, Gordon. These characters are economically

deprived. There is no oil left on Earth because an engineered microbe designed to clean up spills in the earlier century has consumed it all. Gun's father and uncle spend endless hours at a junkyard draining every precious drop of oil from the wrecked vehicles. Time appears to stand still because Donna still works at the local drug store as she has always done.

The third set according to Bisson was a concept of a virtual reality Victoria Secret catalog image that takes place in the Dogg. At the Dogg Gun has encounters with his virtual reality girlfriend, Commissary Tiffany. Bisson affirms that he actually had a Victoria Secrets catalog opened as he described Tiffany's sexy lingerie from scene to scene. However, outside the Dogg Gun cannot remember his fantasy girlfriend because she is copy-protected.

Bisson admits in an interview that when he started writing Pirates of the Universe he intended to follow the same process he followed in writing his novel, Voyage to the Red Planet, and to know exactly how the plot would be developed:

I originally thought that Pirates was going to be that kind of book. I had a difficult time with Pirates because I got about half way in, and I realized that it wasn't just going to be a book about this guy hunting these things.

(June 15, 1996)

Therefore, in a Moby Dick-metaphysical mode Bisson has Gun confronted with the question, "What does it all mean?" He faces more than a challenge of hunting Peteys for admission into an utopian theme park. Skillfully, and with humorous satire, Bisson interweaves a complex plot involving Gun and his prison-escapee brother, Gordon. Bisson fuses reality and perception and human and artificial so the reader is forced to consider what qualities of consciousness make up the true essence of humanity. At the end of the novel, Gun faces the discovery that the Peteys may not be creatures at all. Carl Hays in his review of the novel aptly points out that what Gun must come to terms with is that the Peteys which he has been stalking "may be the seam of this universe's juncture with others just coming into existence" (1424). Therefore, what Gun hunts for profit to gain security is actually another universe which may challenge his own existence.

Before the reader also recognizes the significance of the Peteys, Gun becomes involved in a suspenseful plot of hunting them as he journeys from the Overworld, to K-T to the Dogg. On his last Petey hunt, tragedy strikes and Gun's partner Hadj and his spaceship become lost within the Petey in the procedure as they try to grab the seam of the Petey for capture. When Gun returns to Overworld,

he finds that his pay has been placed on administrative hold. When he finally gains access to his e-mail, he has a letter from home and discovers that Gordon has escaped from prison, and the family property in K-T will be forfeited unless he and the other family members sign Gordon's death certificate. Thus, Gun is caught between visiting home, hunting Peteys and spending time with Tiffany.

This plot movement from world to world and from dream to reality meshes successfully as Bisson combines the ordinary with the fantastic. One technique he uses to accomplish this is by involving the reader directly into the action. In fact, the novel opens with a statement directed to the reader: "You have seen pictures. Who on Earth hasn't" (9). The reader is linked to Gun as he views the Peteys. At first, Gun describes them in stellar terms as they "glow brighter and brighter; until it is at last clear that what you are seeing is no faraway galaxy, or nebula, or gaseous cloud" (9). And then he describes them using a commonplace analogy: "Everytime he saw them was like the first time. Like an old lover, always new" (10). He then describes the approach of the Peteys to the Earth "like moths to a flame" (10).

Bisson continuously juxtaposes the ordinary and the fantastic and often employs the simile for the comparison.

These comparisons often are used when Gun is suspended between reality and a dream-like state. For example, in the Tangle Gun goes into a round chamber which is "shaped like a hersey's kiss or a woman's breast. It was almost euclidean. On the ceiling at the top, dim shapes floated under what seemed to be stars" (227-28). On a journey back to K-T, he is lying on his back watching the sky and is fighting sleep but "sleep is hanging off him like kudzu" (102). Here Bisson compares the image of the wild, uncontrollable vine, especially in K-T, to sleep and a state over which Gun has no control. A similar parallel can be made between Gun's existence in K-T, the Overworld and the Dogg. He appears to have no control over his destiny in any of the three worlds. In a dream, he tries to enter the front door of his home but discovers that the knob spins in his hand "like a planet spinning on its historyless axis" (110). Later when he arrives at Morgan's Ferry, he wishes that he had never come home. But he finds himself standing "between the stones that crowned the low ridge like the logic of an argument showing through the words" (121).

Bisson also uses similes to compare ordinary objects with familiar ones. These images are often nostalgic ones associated with Southern culture. For example, when he reaches the top of the path and looks down on his family's junkyard consisting of three acres of

bumper-to-bumper automobiles, he sees

the whole field of Buicks, Nissans, Cavaliers, Toyotas and Fords, each variety sitting in rows like steel and glass corn, faded but still colorful. If Gun squinted, the Yard looked like a crazy quilt, one of the threadbare pieced tops his mother had brought in her hope chest from Bowling Green so many years ago. (121)

Later, when he regards the tireless work Ham and Hump do as they gather the non-renewable oil from the junkyard wrecks, he thinks that this scene was "like a toothpaste tube; there was always a little left" (126).

In one of the most philosophical moments which the reader shares with Gun, an analogy is made between the straightening effect of gravity and of a comb. While taking a shower, an activity which he believes to be one of Earth's greatest pleasures, Gun puts

his head under and let the water fall over his hair, weighty, unhindered; and let his hair fall into his eyes, and let the water drip down, off his nose. There were certain things about Earth that Gun liked, and water falling was one of them. Gravity straightened water out, like a comb. Sometimes he wondered why gravity wasn't strong enough to comb out the rest of the Universe, which was all in whorls and tangles.

(54)

Here the reader sees Gun questioning what is of value. He has been drawn back home, a theme recurrent in Bisson's work.

On Earth he is again caught philosophizing in a simile when he is looking through a window into his home and sees photographs placed on his grandmother's piano. The photographs concisely and vividly catalog those close to him. On the piano he notes

a picture of Iris at age nine winning a spelling prize, a prize she would keep on receiving for eternity, or until the picture faded, whichever came first; there were Glenn and Gun as babies, dressed to look like twins though they were only cousins born in the same week, with (Hump once said) only one brain between them. There was Iris in a high school band uniform, already getting fat; Iris with the boys, already looking grown at twelve. Then Iris with Glenn and Gun, drooling orphans whose mothers had both been killed in the same car wreck. It was one of the last of K-T's car wrecks, during the Depletion. There was Iris in a cap and gown for her HS graduation. There was Glenn at the boat, already smiling his impenetrable smile, embarking on the lifelong voyage that would take him

nowhere. There was Gun with his first girlfriend, Donna, already wearing her black and white almost-uniform; and Gun in his first Ranger uniform, a green and gray dress affair, missing only (for he was still a Cadet) the braid.

It was all there, through the glass. A world fixed in time like ice, changing, behind a locked door. The past. (112-13)

Paradoxically while Gun strives to live in an utopian world, Bisson depicts his characters living as victims of both corporate and technological powers. The major corporations now have all the governing power on earth and are more dangerous than the governments that once ruled. For example, the Disney-Windows corporation wants to exploit the Peteys.

Like many traditional science fiction writers, Bisson uses satire to show how technological advances on Earth go awry to humankind's detriment. Long after war on Earth by the Three (major political powers) has ended, "The self-replicating defense and maintenance systems built into the orbital war platforms had learned to defend themselves against their makers, and were unapproachable" (17).

Technology turns on itself and causes depletion of all oil reserves with the mutation of one of the oil-eating bacteria that was engineered to clean up oil

spills. Bisson points out other technological changes and creations when he editorializes:

It was, in a sense, only the latest in a long line of creatures, machines, and civilizations that had lived out their brief but flashy life spans fueled by oil; and like the civilization it replaced, it didn't last long. Less than ten years after its birth, it had spread through every crack and cranny of the earth's crust, finding and devouring every last remnant of oil. Having exterminated its host, it died. (103-04)

After the bacteria eats all the oil in the Earth's crevices, the only oil left is that in tanks, drums and cars. Ironically, Hump and Ham are not only owners of a ferry but a junkyard of automobiles which is now considered "the region's largest oil reserve" (112).

But while Hump and Ham are able to survive due to the catastrophic environmental changes caused by flooding and oil depletion, other residents in Morgan's Ferry don't fare so well. The lives of the unfortunate are defined in terms that suggest that they are worthless and non-human:

The rest of the people of this northern edge of K-T were unlisted and unlicensed, unpropertied and unsung, hidden out in the low rocky island

hills raising goats or tobacco on land that didn't officially exist anymore, since the flood. No one knew how many people lived in KT these days. . . . (120)

But perhaps Bisson best brings the satirical commentary into focus by his witty use of present day icons and popular culture images. A play of words or coined expressions often reveals not only a humorous but haunting circumstance. For example, Bisson merges two present day business giants, Disney and Windows, into the leading force on Earth and in space. Spaceships are given names like Henry David and Penn State. Bisson again refers to Thoreau but in a more witty vein. When he thinks of his brother Gordon, Gun comments "Gordon was always quoting Thoreau. Or was it Walden? It was hard to keep those old guys straight, but it didn't matter: the important point was that Gordon loved all those classical guys who were into Simplicity. . ." (70). The Palm Court Ramada is now a prison in space, and the Lion King is a shuttle to Overworld.

Many of Gun's thoughts and memories are based on reading old National Geographic magazines as a youth. Sprinkled throughout the novel are references to specific articles and their publication date. For example, Gun remembers that he was only five when he saw his first picture of the Petey's in an article, "Stately Visitors

from the Depths," dated NG:539:89:9 (13).

The technology of television and communications is also extrapolated into absurdity. On the television at a bar, Gun watches a daytime rerun referred to as "an afternoon fryer" which is entitled "The Chair." On the show, a young man is being executed while the victim's family and the condemned's family appear on the program and receive promotional fees. Also, satellite communication has gone haywire:

From somewhere in orbit, old "lucies" and "cheers," "cosbies and "roseannes" rained down over the planet, switching from one to another in mid-stream. Except in areas where cables had been reinstalled, the screen had made telecommunications erratic at best, and impossible most of the time.

It made TV strange and strangely interesting. It meant that the phone muttered but never rang. Picking it up, you were more likely to get Ricki Lake or David Letterman than a caller. . . .

(133)

Here Bisson lower cases the names of television programs as they become generic names for their category. Much as today's society will use brand names such as Coke and Band-aid in generic usage, Bisson uses the term chevrolet to refer to any automobile and the term marlboro in

reference to cigarettes.

Bisson extends his satire of technology by showing how its encroachment in the penal system dehumanizes. Gordon has escaped from prison, but he is not free because a heartcuff has surgically been implanted in the wall of his heart which causes him to freeze the further away he gets from the prison. Gordon tells Gun, "The only thing that can stop the freezing is a transmitter inside the prison. . . . So they don't have to find me; with the heartcuff, they count on me finding them. Or freezing to death" (155). Technical changes regarding the rising present day prison costs also show dehumanization. Gordon tells Gun that he doesn't need food and says,

"We're all on slow release at Upstate. They give you a tablet every eighteen months. Cuts down on the pleasure you can find in prison, and saves them on food and toilet paper. They've got the staff cut to almost nothing." (156)

Sadly, biologically engineered humans and animals are trademarked. For example, Iris does not have a pet dog but rather a doggit. It is a mechanical creature made to walk upright using paws as arms. Moreover, unlike a live pet, the doggit has "neither regard nor disdain nor interest nor affection" (117). In space, mechanical beings are dubbed as regular persons and can participate in human-like activities. To emphasize the artificiality

of the doggit and regular person, Bisson uses the "TM" sign after the use of each term.

In this novel, Bisson artfully speaks to the reader about reality and perception and the forces of change. Kurt Vonnegut's fictitious character, Eliot Rosewater in God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater, could very well have been speaking to Bisson when he addresses a group of science fiction writers and says,

You're the only ones with guts enough to really care about the future, who really notice what machines do to us, what wars do to us, what cities do to us, what big, simple ideas do to us, what tremendous misunderstandings, mistakes, accidents and catastrophies do to us. You're the only ones zany enough to agonize over time and distances without limit. . . . (27)

Bisson shows that he has "guts enough to really care about the future" when he writes about the role and power of the mass media and the encroachment of technology to make real life unreal and the unreal more like reality.

Chapter VII

Conclusion

Earlier in this study Bisson identifies Pulitzer Prize winning author Jane Smiley as one of his favorite writers. It is her words about describing "miraculous moments" in writing that fittingly defines Bisson's unique voice and art in combining the ordinary and the fantastic to create unique characters and style. In the introduction to The Best American Short Stories 1995, she writes:

When I am reading, I marvel at both miraculous moments--the moment when the print seems to disappear, overwhelmed by the pictures I am making in my imagination of the scenes I am reading, but also the moment when the print reappears and I am me again, rereading an especially delicious passage, trying to figure out just how the author came up with that and how different that is from anything I've read before or could come up with myself. (xii-xiii)

Time and time again Bisson makes the print disappear in his ordinary, yet unordinary scenes. Then when the print reappears the reader cannot only dissect the "delicious passage" to see how Bisson uses clever analogies, the turn of a popular culture phrase, a humorous wordplay or sheer poetry but also consider the alternate answers to

social and philosophical questions which his work poses.

The reader also enjoys "miraculous moments" as Bisson's one-of-a-kind protagonists become real and make the print disappear. In her study, "Science Fiction at Large," fellow science fiction author Ursula K. Le Guin comments on such characters which she describes as "Mrs. Browns" (22). Here she is referring to Virginia Woolf's character Mrs. Brown who embodies the human spirit. Le Guinn states that science fiction writers who create characters who "are people" and who are "Round, solid, knobby. Human beings, with angles and protuberances to them, hard parts and soft parts, depths and heights" are the "real novelists" (22). According to Le Guin, such characters are

Exemplars, teaching aids if you like: they express something the authors wanted urgently to say as clearly as possible. Something about human beings under stress, under peculiarly modern forms of moral pressure" (22)

Bisson's characters become exemplars making statements, sometimes satirically and sometimes humorously, about the state of the world and society. Throughout his stories and novels, Bisson weaves fantastic yet believable outcomes of today's issues projected into the future. As his characters work their magic, man a space ship to Mars, repair automobiles,

search for the last drops of oil on earth, stand in line to gain unspeakable permits and sit around campfires with fire-building bears, Bisson challenges the reader to think about ways in which technological landscapes and human relationships may be fulfilling and at the same time reflecting our own worst nightmare.

The Columbia Literary History of the United States recognizes that one of the most significant new directions in recent American fiction is "the emergence of science fiction (and its various hybrid forms) as a major literary genre that has produced a body of work probably unrivaled in stylistic versatility and thematic relevance" (1162). If the editor of this source were to list contemporary science writers who have been significant in producing "various hybrid forms," certainly Terry Bisson's name would be included.

This study has attempted to take a closer look at Bisson's versatile forms within the science fiction genre, his individual voice and imagination, and his social criticism in order to show his mastery of an art which entertains and informs simultaneously.

Appendix A

Terry Bisson Interview

(Interview with Terry Bisson by Jane Campbell
in Owensboro, Kentucky on June 15, 1996.)

Jane: I had asked you earlier about your details because you had the quote "Words are made out of details" about Pirates of the Universe. . .

Terry: Uh hum.

Jane: Point of view, themes, and so forth, but I just wanted some feedback from you about how you write, you know, as far as details, like in one of the workshops I attended they discussed planning. Do you plan everything, from start to finish before you start writing, or does it happen?

Terry: No, I don't plan everything. Usually with me, I'll have an image or an idea, and then the stuff will grow out from that, like in Pirates. By the details you mean the actual physical details, of the world and how the stuff is put together?

Jane: Yes, I'm intrigued by that, everything though.

Terry: Yea, yea, but see a lot of times...in a

story...I move through a story...the details kind of come along in the story. Pirates kind of moved in the opposite direction because Pirates is really built around three or four big set pieces. I had the idea, one of the things I had was the image of these big things floating through the universe, the Peteys. That was the original title of the novel; it was going to be Peteys.

Jane: Oh really, okay.

Terry: Yea, and that was the central kind of thing and I had that image and I had what I wanted to do. Really, I wanted to do Moby Dick. I wanted to do a thing about somebody hunting these things and the conflict involved in that, and then another sort of image or complex of images presented itself to me, which was the whole idea of K-T, the idea of there being this sort of disincorporated and then sort of an unstated environmental disaster where everything is kind of flooded and there is no oil and all that sort of a post apocalyptic thing and to a large extent the book was a process of yolkling together these two things. It was almost like I had two books and I wanted to make them into

one, and the way I was...made them into one was by having this character moving through Orlando and all this kind of, and going back and forth and then a third kind of image. I sort of work from an image or a concept. The third image or concept that came up to me at that point was the sort of the idea that virtual reality Victoria Secret catalog is sort of weird and....

Jane: Yea, yea.

Terry: And, which in this book it is called the Dogg, and the guy spends all of his time in the Dogg, and so those three things together. I wanted to do something that would tie them all together, and so it's a little different than the way I usually do a book. It's an unusual process. I saw that.

Jane: I wondered if you had that Victoria Secret catalog right there in front of you.

Terry: Well I did. I did and I'd actually taken and I'd pulled a section out of it while I was writing the book. I did a short story for Playboy based on the same sort of idea; well you know the same characters but I did another. I had a Playboy story published back in April. I guess I don't know if you ever saw it. I think

it's in April, and it has some of the same stuff, but that's the process, you see, the process in Voyage to the Red Planet was completely different. I knew in Voyage to the Red Planet exactly what that book was going to be all the way through, and it's a very simple book. It's just a ... it's either you go to Mars or you come back and that was ... that was a much simpler book, and I had originally thought that Pirates was going to be that kind of book. I had a difficult time with Pirates because I got about halfway in, and I realized that it wasn't just going to be about this guy hunting these things. I hope this barge doesn't mess your tape up. It probably won't and so I got stalled with this book because I couldn't figure out. It wasn't really the book ... it wasn't ... it turned into a different book, and sometimes this and I wanted to follow where it was going like where the guy, he spends a lot of time on Earth and K-T and dealing with his brother - his cousin - it's his big brother and all that kind of stuff and so it was a frustrating and difficult process to work all that out, and one of the frustrations was that I began to realize that as that I'm primarily a

short story writer and as a novelist I don't really have a reliable technique where I can sit down with an outline and do a novel and think, well in six months this will be a novel. I can do that with a short story like the painter in "Two Guys From the Future" and she says it's all there a short story will do that, a short story ... well you work with computers. A short story will all be in random order. It kind of will all be there. A novel really can't. You have to have to take a long view, and you have to really kind of work with it for a long period of time, and I think that I've written some fairly successful novels. I'm happy with the novels, but I don't think of myself as a very good novelist because I don't have ... I sort of have to hack out each one and sort of learn how to do it all over. I can sit down with a short story and as soon as I've got an idea and I do the first and second part of it, I know that say at the end of the week or at the end of two weeks I'm going to come up with a short story. I'm pretty confident of that. I actually know how to do it, and I feel like I'm pretty good at it. In a novel I invariably hit a spot about halfway through when I realized I didn't, I

don't really know what I'm doing. I didn't plan it out very well, and I have to flounder around, and I lose my confidence and I sort of get stalled and blocked on it, and so it is not a very satisfying process. I didn't have a lot of fun doing Pirates. I had a lot of fun setting it up. I had a lot of fun finishing, but in the middle I had about a year I didn't know what to do with it, and I'd worked on short stories. I did other stuff, and I don't think it's a very good method. I think that if I were, I think as a novelist I need to figure I need to be sharp enough to know what kind of novel I'm writing and sort of how to do it. I haven't really figured that out yet.

Jane: So you put the novel down for about a year?

Terry: Yes.

Jane: At the point that Gun went back to his home?

Terry: Yea. Well all I'm saying is that's my method. For each novel I've done my method has actually been different, and that is a weakness I think of my own. I don't think that's necessarily the way it's done. I think that's my problem.

Jane: Well, it works for you.

Terry: Yes.

Jane: You know you mentioned you need form in the

forum with Joe, but you know the form.

Terry: Well.

Jane: You're not going to let it rule you; it sounds like.

Terry: Yea, well sometimes see like a form of Talking Man is basically a chase. You're going from here to there; you know like Voyage to the Red Planet.

Jane: I like Talking Man. It's one of my favorites.

Terry: Yea, and it's still my favorite. It is but it has a very simple formal structure, but I had a hard time with that one actually.

Jane: It's beautiful.

Terry: I got about two-thirds of the way through Talking Man and I realized I didn't know who's chasing who. I didn't know if they were chasing Talking Man or if he was chasing them, and you actually need to know that.

Jane: Yea.

Terry: You know so all I'm saying is that as a professional, and I think there's a certain level of professionalism you need if you're writing for a living, and you need to and I'm beginning to realize that I need to sharpen my skills with novels about conceptualizing a little more so I'm not always surprised in the

middle of a novel you know.

Jane: Well, in the Locus article you know you're working with a Miller book and you said you've been working on a political book. What were you speaking of?

Terry: Oh, I'm editing a memoir by a doctor who was a prisoner. He was in prison for like seven and a half years, and he's a radical from the Sixties who was a friend of mine who got involved in an underground group, and they were blowing up things, and they went underground and stuff and then he eventually got arrested and went to prison. While he was in prison, he discovered he had cancer, and he basically would not have survived except for the fact that he himself is a medical doctor and he had a lot of support on the outside and was able to diagnose himself and demand the medical care, and now he's out of prison, and he's in good health and he's sort of telling that story and so I'm working with him on that, I'm sort of helping him put it together.

Jane: At the end of that section though it says you're going to get back to writing after you finish this.

Terry: Uh, hum.

Jane: What are you going to be getting back to?

Terry: Well, I have a lot of projects right now. I've finished Voyage obviously or Pirates rather. What is it now? It's July. I may be taking on another project like that which I'll tell you about it since I signed a contract on it but it's a memoir of the Sixties. It's by it's sort of a ghost writing project by somebody who went through the Sixties and stuff. I may be doing their book, but I'll be done with that also by about October. I'll probably sign another contract to do some of those Johnny Quest novels. I've done two or three of those and I have one more under contract but they're pretty simple. I got very inspired when I read the Jane Smiley. I finished her book called A Thousand Acres which is a very well known book. It was a Pulitzer Prize. It's about a midwestern farm family and it's not my kind of book, I was very impressed with it. It's about a Mid Western farm family in Iowa and what they're dealing with is basically King Lear. Do you know King Lear? It's a story of King Lear. This father divides his farm up because he decides he wants to get out of the business between his three daughters and

then regrets it you know and it's a great book. And it occurred to me that I wanted to write a regular mainstream novel that would have no fantastic or fantasy elements in it, whatsoever. I don't know if I'll actually do that. I'm trying. I've actually outlined it...

(At this point of the interview

Joe Survant enters the conversation.)

Terry: Well, I'm thinking about it. Jane Smiley sort of inspired me. I told Jane I'm thinking about doing a mainstream novel and make a lot of money.

Joe: Get rich?

Terry: Yea, yea, but anyway see if I can do it I've never actually done it. I've only written one mainstream story, and I had a hell of a time selling it. You may have read it. It's the one about Alzheimers about...

Joe: Yea, I read it.

Terry: Yea, yea. It was... it's you know it's a fairly decent little story. I guess it's not great. I sold it finally to Century. She was asking my plans. My plan is to finish this memoir and then another memoir and then go back to work on my own stuff. I'm sort of on

vacation right now. I sold a short story to Playboy in January which will come out next year, and that was the last piece of my own fiction that I did. Actually the last piece of my own fiction that I did was that little piece about the fictional machine in the newspaper. You know the black hole thing, but so that's when I'll go back to my own stuff and it may not work. Sometimes short stories for me also can be like writer's block. I got blocked on Pirates.

Jane: The No Thrills books? No Thrills. What does that mean?

Joe: What was that about?

Terry: oh, the No Thrills book. They were ...

Joe: As a generic set.

Terry: Yea, they're generic books. I didn't write them. I just put the packet- I put I came up with the idea. You're too young to remember. You remember when they had no thrills beans, no thrills carrots, and black and white?

Joe: We call it generic.

Terry: Generic package.

Joe: Had no brand.

Terry: That had a stripe on the front. It would just say beans, you know. Do you remember that?

Joe: Instead of Delmonte beans, you just see a can on the shelf which would say beans.

Terry: In about '78 or '79 it was you know and so I came up with the idea. Let's do No Thrills books, so that we had a no thrills western and a no thrills romance.

Jane: Oh, okay.

Joe: And that was the title.

Terry: They're actually very cute. They're a lot of fun. They were a huge success with the media. The media loved them. I have a file this thick of reviews. They were reviewed a full page in the New York Times Book Review. Every newspaper had - because the press loved it. I mean it's this great idea.

Joe: Yea.

Terry: Nobody bought them. Nobody was stupid to buy them. That's the thing. It was totally a ...

Joe: Just a neat idea.

Terry: It was a neat idea. Yea and they were real cute. I've still got some of them at home and they were each little book was just about seventy-five pages. They're sort of like Airplane. You take every cliché of a western and you put them together. I still remember the cover copy for the western. It's a no

thrills western, complete with everything, cowboys, horses, lady, blood, dust, and guns. You know it was good. It was just a joke, but it was a lot of fun ...

Jane: If you can just think back about what sparked an idea like the Pirates of the Universe amusement park. You work your way to live in or like the heart cuff. Anything like ...

Terry: What sparked the idea for Pirates of the Universe is that my editor wouldn't accept Peteys as the title. It should have been the title, and he said we need a better title. I thought well what's the ABSOLUTE dumbest science fiction title I can think of. Well there it is, Pirates of the Universe. And then I had to justify the title, and so then I thought of the idea of having a park called Pirates of the Universe.

Jane: Oh, you worked from that realm. Okay.

Terry: It was all done backwards. All done backgrounds ...

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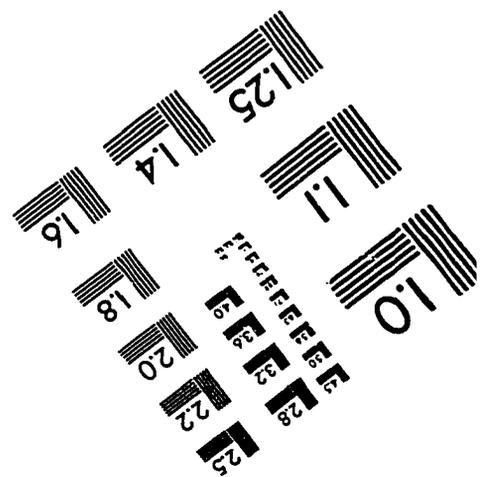
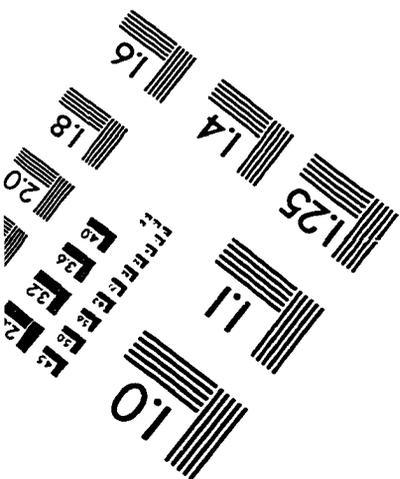
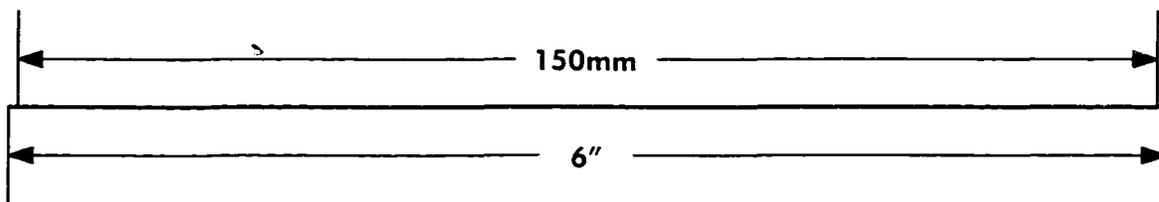
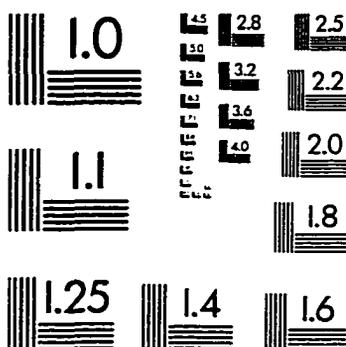
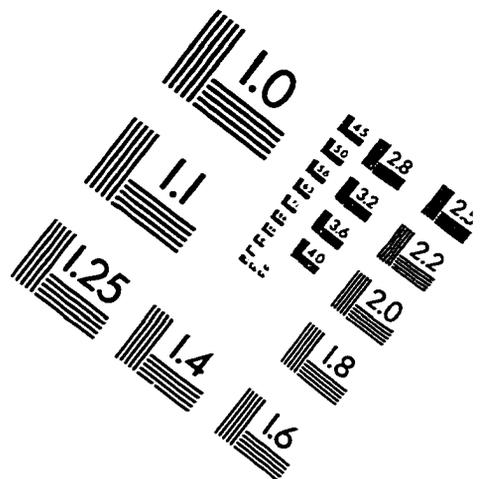
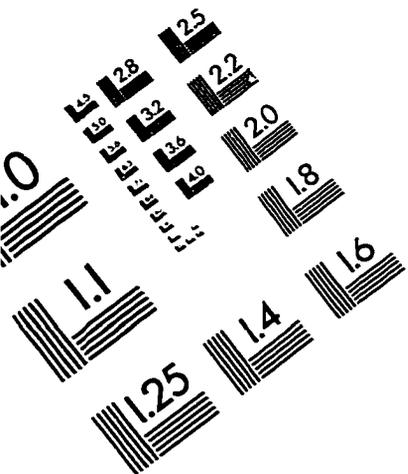
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