

The First Two Pages: “Stars the Color of Hope”

By Carol Gyzander

From *Hideous Progeny: Classic Horror Goes Punk* (Writerpunk Press)

Cyberpunk Lovecraft mystery, anyone?

My story “Stars the Color of Hope” is from the fifth Writerpunk Press anthology, *Hideous Progeny: Classic Horror Goes Punk*. All of the stories must follow the same conceit—a ’punk genre story inspired by a work of classic horror.

I tilted at the windmill of H.P. Lovecraft’s story “The Colour Out of Space,” the first-person, rambling narrative of a surveyor, sent to a farm in Arkham, Massachusetts. He finds that a meteor has landed and brought with it a truly alien entity that poisons the water, land and crops—the “blasted heath”—and drives the locals mad.

In order to make a strong contrast to the original story’s style and period, I chose cyberpunk, a sub-genre of science fiction that commonly takes place in a near future, dystopic version of our world (think *Blade Runner* movie). Corporations have often taken over from the government, and the common person is typically downtrodden; if they try to improve their lot, things often wind up worse than if they hadn’t tried.

While those who read the story in the anthology will know that it's inspired by Lovecraft, the story must still stand on its own. In the first two pages, then, I needed to set up both the new story and the cyberpunk genre, as well as tie it into the original story.

It was also important to avoid the trap of being overly verbose, as many of Lovecraft's stories are nowadays considered. (Sorry, H.P.) Short stories are, well, short, and mine is a third the length of his. My mission in the first two pages, therefore, was to rapidly do the Who, What, Where, When and Why: show us the main character, place the story in a future urban cyberpunk setting, and indicate where and why he is going somewhere. I feel that the story is successful in this, with one caveat I'll mention in a moment.

It's divided into separate days, like a narrative, which tells the reader immediately that the main character is leaving (what: departing on a mission), and then describes the urban setting from which he is starting out (where: references to Sacramento and Kansas indicate he's in our world). I use some of the common cyberpunk themes or features to immediately show he's in a different version of our world in the future (when/where: aeropod; crowded city with levels and neon lights; Corporation-run complex; common man is unemployed; and alas—Wichita is apparently no more). Here's the beginning:

Departure Day

Clay tapped his foot as the crowded, dirty street sped past the windows. The aeropod hurtled toward the edge of the city. Neon lights flashed across his face as he passed the end of the science and agricultural center—above unemployed vagrants waiting in food lines on the lowest city level—and entered the outer fringes of the Corporation complex called Old Sacramento.

One man and supplies for a week, heading east toward the abandoned hydroponic station near what used to be Wichita, Kansas of the Eastern Zone.

To me, characters are the most important part of a story, and it's important to show what is inside them or makes them tick. Once he leaves the city, Clay is the only character in the story so I wanted to start out with some human interaction as he is leaving in order to show what he is like (who), while also telling more about his task (what/why):

Clay was mentally reviewing the route he had plotted to navigate the dangerous path to the destination. His shoulders hunched and his lips tightened. He glared at the buzz from the communication unit embedded in his forearm.

“Hey, Clay,” the voice of his liaison said over the comscreen. “Lighten up. What are you so worried about? All you have to do is figure out what happened out there and see if the Corporation can start up the hydroponics again.”

Clay frowned and realized that he had been gripping the stick as he watched the city speed by. “CorpOne, nobody's been out there for thirty years. There's no response from the computers since the Collapse, even after the Corporation tried to break into the government network...or what's left of it. Who knows what I'm heading into?”

His contact laughed. “Come on, man. We can only spare one worker and you volunteered for this job. I’ve never even been outside of the shield.”

“Yeah, right. I’m one of the last people left with both hydro and old computer skills.” Clay snorted. “So the Corporation gave me no choice. Volunteer or starve.”

“Well, take good care of that little pod—it’s the only one left that will make it over the mountains.” The voice laughed. “Got no cavalry to send after you, man.”

Now we know that he’s a bit of a cynical guy, one of the last of the old generation. He has a difficult task, plus he’s tense and uncertain about what he’s going to find. What caused the collapse? We’ve also learned a lot more about the world; the Corporation took over from the collapsed Government in classic cyberpunk manner, and the city is isolated from the world outside the shield. Here’s the caveat I mentioned earlier—I feel like this conversation is just a tad info-dumpy. I could have added a few lines to make it a smoother and more natural conversation. Sigh.

That’s enough of the city—now that Clay is grounded in time and place, it’s time to get out and see more about where he’s going. By the middle of the second page, he’s already well on his journey and approaching his destination. In this section, I provide a throwback reference to Lovecraft’s setting on the “blasted heath” with gray, decimated plant life, and to the alien glow he will encounter. Those familiar with the original story will get the references, and those who are not will see it as just description:

Day 1

He slept through the night and awoke with a start when he realized he was still moving. It was just beginning to be light, and it took him a moment to realize what was different. He was soaring over an empty plain. There were no more normal trees in view. Short gray shrubs with sickly, stunted branches jutted up out of the ground of the blasted heath below, and the gray spread as far as the eye could see. Ahead of him arose huge buildings, outlined against a faint, strange glow on the horizon that was like nothing Clay could remember. He rubbed his eyes but finally attributed it to the rising sun.

So, in just the first two pages I have set the scene, introduced the main character and his mission, and given some references to Lovecraft fans to tie it into the inspiration story.

In the remainder of the tale Clay explores the defunct hydroponic facility, including the source of that “faint, strange glow” which he will, of course, find to be the alien Colour Out of Space. There are some more similarities to the inspiring story, but it veers off in a different direction as he unravels the mystery of what happened to the hydroponic facility. He rediscovers both a connection to the natural world and a hope for the future by being able to commune with the stars again.

Until, of course, all goes terribly wrong, and the common man’s hopes are dashed in classic cyberpunk fashion.

This is, after all, a horror story.

#

Carol Gyzander was a prolific reader of classic science fiction and Agatha Christie mysteries in her early days. She studied anthropology and English Literature at Bryn Mawr College, two of her favorite things—people and words.

Her kids have recently flown the coop and left her with two cats, a clear indication that she finally had to turn to writing. She's active with Writerpunk Press, which produces anthologies of punk stories inspired by classics. Carol's written cyberpunk versions of *Macbeth* and *Henry V*, "The Clockwork Raven" based upon Poe's poem, and a steampunk Tom Sawyer. The latest anthology, *Hideous Progeny: Classic Horror Goes Punk*, has her cyberpunk Lovecraft story discussed in this post and is available at Amazon.

She has several other stories in various anthologies, does content and copy editing, and has finally turned back to her original love with an amateur detective novel in the works.

See what else Carol is working on at www.CarolGyzander.com.