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WRITING CLASS

By

Robert Sheckley

"Never use cliches in describing alien life-forms," Professor Carner admonished his class. But Eddie persisted—with good reason!

EDDIE McDermott paused at the door, then caught his breath and tiptoed into the classroom and to his seat. Mort Edison, his best friend, looked at him reprovingly; the class had been in session for almost fifteen minutes, and one just didn't come late to Professor Carner's lecture. Especially on the first day.

Eddie breathed easier as he saw that Professor Carner's back was to the class as he completed a diagram on the blackboard.

"Now then," Carner said. "Suppose you were writing about the—ah—the Venusian Threngener, which, as you know, has three legs. How would you describe it?"

One of the students raised his hand. "I'd call it a three-legged monstrosity, spawned in the deepest hells of—"

"No," Carner said quietly. "That kind of writing might have been all right in the earliest days of our subject. But remember: You are no

longer dealing with a simple, credulous audience. To achieve the proper effects nowadays, you must *underplay!* Understand? Underplay! Now, someone else?"

Mort raised his hand, threw a glance at Eddie, and said: "How about, 'this tri-pedal blob of orange protoplasm, octopus like in its gropings—'"

"That's better," Carner said. "Tri-pedal is very nice, very exact. But must you compare it to an octopus?"

"Why not?" Mort asked.

"An octopus," the professor said, "is a well-known form of Earth life. It inspires no terror, no wonder. You might better compare the Threngener to *another* strange monster; a Callistan Eddel-splayer, for example." He smiled winningly at the class.

Eddie frowned and scratched his blonde crewcut. He had liked it better the first way. But Carner should know, of course. He was one of the best-known writers in the en-

tire field, and he had done the college a favor by agreeing to teach the course. Eddie remembered reading some of Carner's stuff. It had scared the living daylights out of him when he was younger. That description of Saturnian brains immobilizing Earth-confederation ships, for example. That had been a great yarn.

THE trouble is, Eddie thought, I'm just not interested. He had had serious doubts about this course. Actually, he had signed up only because Mort had insisted.

"Any questions at this point?" Carner asked. One of the students—a serious-looking fellow wearing black horn-rimmed glasses—raised his hand.

"Suppose," he asked, "suppose you were writing a story speculating on an interstellar combine formed with the purpose of taking over Earth? Would it be permissible, for greater contrast, to make Earth's enemies black-hearted villains?"

A political thinker, Eddie thought with a sneer. He glanced hopefully at the clock.

"It wouldn't be advisable." Carner sat casually on the corner of his desk. "Make them human also; show the reader that these aliens—whether they have one head or five—have emotions understandable to them. Let them feel joy and pain. Show them as being misguided. Pure evil in your characters has gone out of fashion."

"But could I make their leader

pure evil?" the young man asked, busily jotting down everything Carner had said.

"I suppose so," Carner said thoughtfully. "But give him motivations also. By the way, in dealing with that sort of story—the panoramic kind—remember not to oversimplify the aliens' problems. If they amass an army of twenty million, all have to be fed. If the rulers of fifty scattered star systems meet in conclave, remember that different star systems have different languages, and different races have different nervous systems. Bear in mind also, that there would be little logical reason for attacking earth; the galaxy is filled with so many stars and planets, what is the necessity of fighting for one?"

The horn-rimmed fellow nodded dubiously, writing his notes with tremendous speed. Eddie stifled a yawn. He preferred to think of his villains as pure unadulterated evil; it made characterization so much easier. And he was getting tremendously bored.

Carner answered questions for the next half hour. He told them not to describe Venus as a 'jungle-choked green hell,' never, never to call the moon 'pock-marked,' 'small-pox pitted,' or 'scarred from centuries of meteoric bombardment.'

"All this has been said," he explained. "Millions of times. *Do not* use cliches."

He went on to explain that the red spot of Jupiter need not be called a malevolent red eye, that

Saturn's rings don't necessarily resemble a halo, and that the inhabitants of Venus are not Venetians.

"All common errors," he said. "I want a thousand words from each of you next time. I suggest that you choose a planet and write a fresh study of it, avoiding with care all the cliches I mentioned. Class dismissed."

"Well, whadja think?" Mort asked Eddie in the hall. "Isn't he great? I mean, he really *knows!*"

"I'm dropping out of the class," Eddie said, making up his mind.

"What! Why?"

"Well," Eddie said, "There's no reason why I shouldn't call the red spot on Jupiter a malevolent red eye. I put that in a story last month, and it sounded good. And that Venetian Threngener—I think it's a *monstrosity*, and I'm going to write about it that way."

He paused, and his face hardened with conviction.

"But the real reason—well, I'm just not interested in journalism. I'm dropping Carner's course in fact feature-article writing, because I want to write fiction!"

THE END
