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Remembering George Alec Effinger

By Andrew Fox

I didn't know George nearly as long as many of his other friends and students did. I first met him in the fall of 1994, when I signed up for his "World Building: Writing SF and Fantasy" course at the University of New Orleans Metropolitan College. The last time I saw him, about the last time anyone saw him, was little more than seven years later, in the spring of 2002, not long before his far-too-young death at the age of fifty-five.

In one big way, George was responsible for the success I've had so far in becoming a professional writer. It wasn't referring me to an editor or an agent; George didn't feel comfortable doing that, and I didn't feel comfortable pressing him. He didn't personally critique the work that ended up being the first book I'd sell, *Fat White Vampire Blues*. He didn't share with me the magical secret needed to write a salable novel, although he certainly passed along very valuable suggestions and insights during his course and workshop meetings. What he did do was to found, back in 1988, an ongoing writing workshop and critique group that has met every month, come floods or hail or hurricanes, for the past fifteen years. This group has given

me an audience to write for, a sense of deadlines and discipline, and the carefully thought out comments of a dozen intelligent readers, not to mention a haven of friendship and support. Although George has certainly been at its heart, this durable little group has survived his absence and, more sadly, his death. George told a number of people that he considered founding the workshop group the accomplishment of which he was most proud. Considering his other accomplishments, that's saying an awful lot.

George Alec Effinger was the dean of New Orleans science fiction writers. Actually, this accolade doesn't give him nearly the credit he deserves, because for much of his thirty-year writing career, he was the *only* science fiction writer who made New Orleans his home. Unlike playwrights (Tennessee Williams), mainstream novelists (Truman Capote, Sherwood Anderson, William Faulkner), mystery writers (Julie Smith, Christine Wiltz), or horror authors (Anne Rice, Poppy Z. Brite), New Orleans has never been replete with writers of science fiction. Maybe it's the fact that so many aspects of this town are so backward; our school system and the state of our streets, to take two examples, are essentially Third World in character, or at least Caribbean. Most residents' thoughts tend toward the glories of the distant past or the problems and pleasures of the present; not too many brain cells can be spared for contemplating the future (particularly given the local level of alcohol consumption).

That being the case, George would've been a standout in a city with a hundred active science fiction writers. He began writing SF in his early twenties, after meeting authors Damon Knight and Kate Wilhelm (George's first wife was Damon and Kate's babysitter). Shortly thereafter, he attended the 1970 Clarion Writers' Workshop and had four stories published in the first Clarion anthology. His first novel, *What Entropy Means to Me*, a wildly ambitious book that combined elements of folklore, quest sagas, and postmodern literary theory with SF colonization tropes, was published in 1972; it was nominated for a Nebula Award. One of his

early stories, “All the Last Wars at Once,” was nominated for a Hugo Award that same year. He would be nominated for Hugo or Nebula awards four more times before winning both (plus the Theodore Sturgeon Memorial Award) for his novelette “Schrödinger’s Kitten” in 1989. George, a lifelong baseball fan (primarily of the Cleveland Indians), gave a memorable acceptance speech at the Nebula Awards banquet, quoting Lou Gehrig’s farewell to the Yankees (“...today, I consider myself the luckiest man in the world... world... world...”). During his career, he published nearly two hundred stories, many of which were assembled in six collections, and twenty-two novels. His best-known books are the Marîd Audran trilogy: *When Gravity Fails* (1987), *A Fire in the Sun* (1989), and *The Exile Kiss* (1991). George was working on a fourth Marîd book, *Word of Night*, when he passed away in 2002.

George moved to New Orleans following his participation in the 1971 Clarion workshop, which was held at Tulane University, located in a particularly beguiling section of the Uptown neighborhood. He lived in New Orleans, mostly in the French Quarter or one of several Uptown apartments, for the rest of his life, with the exception of two years spent in Los Angeles, from 1998 to 2000, during his marriage to fellow writer Barbara Hambly. He often supplemented his writing income by teaching.

During the summer of 1994, a friend at work handed me a catalog to look through of noncredit night courses at UNO, and I spotted a description of George’s class, which he’d been teaching once or twice a year since the mid-eighties. Just a few months earlier, I’d started writing my first fantasy-horror novel, *Fire on Iron*, an alternate universe tale set during the Civil War, which involved ironclad gunboats and African fire demons in war-torn Mississippi. This wasn’t my first book project; that was *Draining the Everglades*, a *bildungsroman* told through eight different viewpoint characters, which I’d written in spurts between 1989 and 1993. This seven-hundred-page-plus training exercise did not result in a flurry of literary prizes and offers of

publication, to my considerable disappointment.

I was in the midst of reassessing my prospects as a novelist when I learned my employer, the Louisiana Office of Public Health, was planning significant layoffs. Since I didn't have much in the way of seniority at the time, I began contemplating other possible money-making opportunities. I'd always been a huge fan of SF, fantasy, and horror, although halfway through my college years I'd stopped reading in the field, choosing to concentrate on mainstream fiction. With incredible naiveté (in retrospect), I told myself, *Why not write a quick science fiction or fantasy novel? It'll be easy, and a whole lot simpler to sell than a literary novel.* The layoff ended up not affecting me, but I began my new book nonetheless. And so it happened that I learned of George's class, which included an opportunity for professional critique of a story or novel chapter, at precisely the right time.

When I registered for the course, I wasn't very familiar with George and his work, having only heard that some of his stories took place in New Orleans. My decade-long sabbatical from reading in the field meant that I'd missed all his big books, from *The Nick of Time* and *The Bird of Time* to the Marîd Audran series. Looking him up in my SF reference books wasn't very illuminating, because they'd all been published before 1982. Still, the thought of being taught by an honest-to-gosh SF professional was certainly thrilling, and I determined to read at least a few of his books before the class started.

This proved to be more difficult than I'd expected. George's most recent novel, *The Exile Kiss*, had been published in 1991 and was already out of print. This being the B.I. years—Before Internet (at least the internet of Amazon.com)—I scoured the local bookshops, but I was only able to find a copy of one novel, *A Fire in the Sun*. I had much better luck at the main branch of the New Orleans Library. Having classified George as a Louisiana author (although all his works, mysteries included, were shelved in the science fiction section), the library had

amassed an almost complete set of George's books, including all the short fiction collections and even his early mainstream novel, *Felicia*. The first class was quickly approaching, so I checked out the thinnest of the collections, a small press offering called *Author's Choice Monthly: The Old Funny Stuff*. It turned out to be a felicitous choice, containing a number of George's personal favorites.

I later heard that much of George's early renown had been based upon his shorter work, and this collection provided ample evidence as to why. You'd be hard pressed to find a more dead-pan, spot-on satirical SF story than "The Aliens Who Knew, I Mean, *Everything*," an exceedingly clever variation on the theme of the dangers of utopia (especially when supplied by benevolent aliens). I had spent several years in my early twenties in thrall to the Beat writers of the 1950s, and "Mars Needs Beatniks" featured pitch-perfect pastiches of Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, the young (White Negro, wannabe Beat) Norman Mailer, and William S. Burroughs—and the story brilliantly deposited this hipster Burroughs on the world of an earlier namesake: Edgar Rice Burroughs' Mars.

My favorite of the stories, and maybe my favorite of all George's stories, was a more modest tale called "White Hats," inspired by an actual mugging George suffered in Uptown New Orleans. Maybe because it was so close to his own experiences, this story managed to combine the wit and imagination that were the bedrock of George's output with a quality which sometimes could be crowded out by the profusions of cleverness—real heart. The story's protagonist and his wife are mugged close to their Uptown home, and when they go to a nearby police station, they are dismayed to find how little the police are willing to do for them. Their sense of safety shattered, they return home, only to find that, one by one, radio, movie serial, and pulp heroes from the husband's childhood show up on their doorstep, offering to help recover the stolen wallet and purse. Before long, their living room and spare bedrooms are crowded with the

likes of the Lone Ranger and Tonto, the Shadow, the Spider, Captain Midnight, G-8 and his Battle Aces, Tarzan, and the Green Hornet and Kato. Most of these heroes turn out to be more interested in collegial chat, free coffee, and whatever food can be found in the recesses of the couple's refrigerator than crime-busting. But in its last pages, the story veers away from sheer farce into a more serious and heartfelt examination of the power of nostalgia and how the trust so common in childhood can sometimes be regained, at least temporarily, by cynical, hardened adults.

I also loved *A Fire in the Sun*, the second of George's Marîd Audran books. I had a slight bit of trepidation about reading the books out of sequence, but George did such a good job of bringing me up to speed that once I was past the first chapter, I wasn't even cognizant of having missed a first book. I dove right in and found that it was one of those novels that takes over your life, that insists you put other chores and labors aside until you've read through to the last page. I started it on the Saturday before the first class, sitting on a park bench in Audubon Park. Before long, the park's lagoons had become the dive bars and pleasure pens of the Budayeen, and the joggers and dog walkers surrounding me became Muslims of the far future, temporarily sloughing off the restrictions of their faith for the sleazy delights of sin. In those days before the fall of the Twin Towers, I, like most Americans, knew extremely little about Islam. George's book provided a window onto that fascinatingly alien culture, a world suffused with piety and the laws of hospitality, even among the criminal classes. In hindsight, I think the Islamic aspect of the novels is even more engrossing than the books' cyberpunk elements, which were the series' most celebrated feature when the books first appeared.

Then came the Wednesday night when I got to meet the great man in person. He was shorter than I'd expected (no, not really). I think he was in a period of relatively good health, so, if memory serves, he looked like a pretty average middle-aged man: hairline receding; maybe

fifteen pounds heavier than his ideal insurance-tables weight (that would change—his recurring illnesses would make George much scrawnier); thick black mustache hiding teeth that needed some work. What set him apart from the average were his eyes, full of liveliness, and his fast, fast wit. George really knew how to work a room. I don't think I've ever met anyone else who could so effortlessly make himself the epicenter of any social gathering. Part of George's motivation in becoming the focus of any group he found himself in was his near-deafness, which hearing aids only partially compensated for; I'm sure it was much easier for him to be part of the conversation by dominating it, rather than trying to decipher all that his companions were saying. But no one ever minded, because he was so damned funny, so damned smart and knowledgeable, and he had such a keen sense of what his companions would find irresistibly interesting.

Over the next six weeks, I benefited from George's encyclopedic knowledge of the history of the SF field, the state of the markets, how to package one's work so one didn't look like a rank amateur, and various architectures for constructing a successful story or novel. George selected Cordwainer Smith's "The Game of Rat and Dragon" and Robert Heinlein's *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress* as our study texts. Barbara Hambly visited from California and sat in on one of George's lectures, so we were gifted with the opportunity to hear another prominent professional's viewpoints on the field.

One of George's defining social traits was that he didn't drive. I don't think he ever owned a car; certainly not while he was living in New Orleans. New Orleans isn't the worst city in the country to live in without a car, but it's not the best, either. George lived either in the French Quarter or Uptown during most of his thirty years in the city. Both of those neighborhoods were pretty well served by buses and the streetcar line, but it was difficult to get from either to the lakefront, where the University of New Orleans is located.

George relied on students and workshop members for rides out to campus. I tried

elbowing to the front of the line to offer Teach a ride. I figured the twenty-minute drive between UNO and George's apartment would provide a great one-on-one opportunity to pitch my novel and pick his brain regarding agents and publishers, the two Holy Mysteries all eager neophytes feel they must demystify as soon as humanly possible. During the six weeks of the class, I think I had the chance to drive George on only one occasion; he enjoyed catching rides with Larry Gegenheimer, another would-be novelist who had taken the class once before and had struck up a friendship with George. So far as I can remember, all we talked about on the drive was life in New Orleans, although I may've asked him what Robert Silverberg was like. Given the chance to be nakedly mercenary, I wimped out.

It was probably for the best, anyway. The class ended in November, and I joined the workshop group the following January, and the workshop ended up giving me what I really needed—a live audience, and the confidence that slowly comes from learning how to satisfy one's audience. My family suffered a major trauma during the intervening six weeks; my cousin Amy, thirty-one years old, was killed in the French Quarter on New Year's Eve by celebratory gunfire. I would spend all that following year helping to establish and gather funds for the New Year Coalition, a public safety advocacy campaign meant to abolish the century-old custom of gunfire on New Year's Eve in New Orleans, an evil, ignorant tradition that had been wounding between five and fifteen people every December 31 for years. My new friends in the workshop were all very supportive. Many of them attended the various fund-raisers I organized, all-star music jams at the Howlin' Wolf club and the House of Blues. The other professional writer in the group, historical mystery writer Laura Joh Rowland, was especially supportive, attending most of the Coalition's events with her husband Marty. She was also extremely helpful in the critique circle, where her rigorous sense for plot mechanics and pacing guided me in reshaping the early portions of my book.

Fire on Iron got a gratifyingly positive reaction from the group. George made a few humorous jabs at my nineteenth-century sailors' dialogue, which he pronounced too "salty" for his tastes, but he was very encouraging for the most part. When George founded the workshop in 1989, he'd modeled it on the Clarion workshops he'd attended in the early 1970s, even though Clarion's sessions were held daily, over a six-week period, and George's workshop was a once-a-month affair. One of the most important rules he imported from Clarion was the no cross-talk rule—the writer being critiqued couldn't respond to any critiquer until after the piece had gone entirely around the circle, and critiquers weren't allowed to speak when another was speaking. The only person who regularly broke this rule was George himself. No one really minded when George was "naughty," though. His sense of humor was irrepressible, and no group member expected him to squelch the dozens of delicious puns our submissions and comments sparked in his receptive brain until his regulation turn to speak came. Besides, the man who'd set the rules was entitled to consider himself above them. And most importantly, his quips were often the tart sweetness that showed us beginners what numbskulls we were being, precisely how we were being numbskulls, and how we might evolve beyond being such numbskulls; all phrased with such delightful cleverness that we targets of George's barbs happily swallowed our medicine with no trace of resentment.

George was a regular guest and frequent toastmaster at what was then New Orleans' top literary SF convention, the New Orleans Science Fiction and Fantasy Festival. NOSFFF (now defunct, sadly) was a readers' con, showcasing dozens of top speculative fiction writers, who were enticed to come year after year by a good crowd of literate fans and the food and frolic of New Orleans. (Although by the time I started attending, the annual NOSFFFs had been forced to migrate from downtown New Orleans to a Sheraton out by the airport, a change that dimmed their appeal to out-of-towners who hoped to be able to lurch drunkenly from the convention floor

straight onto the sidewalks of Bourbon Street.)

I only had the opportunity to attend a couple of NOSFFFs with George before he left town and then the conventions stopped breaking even and faded from the scene. My best memory is wandering around the dealers room with George, a couple months after I'd handed in the last chapters of *Fire on Iron* to the workshop group. George ran into someone he knew, either a book dealer or a fellow writer, and he paid me the nicest compliment I ever got from him. He introduced me as someone to watch out for, a member of the next generation of writers who were going to take over the field from grizzled old veterans like himself. His tongue was stuck at least partially in cheek, but I could tell he was being sincere, too. And I sure appreciated the vote of confidence.

Members of the workshop often invited George on social outings, to dinners or minor league baseball games or our Christmas parties. More often than not, he was a no-show, sometimes turning away at the last minute people who had driven to his apartment to pick him up. Usually he'd say his stomach was acting up; ever since his early twenties, he'd suffered from stomach and intestinal tumors and other recurring ailments. Sometimes he'd offer no excuse at all, just wouldn't come to the door or answer the phone when the driver would call to ask what had happened. Based on later experiences with him, I'd guess that George was suffering from depression in addition to his physical ailments, and depression can act like a suffocating blanket, cutting off a person's desire for contact with friends and family. In retrospect, one of my biggest disappointments regarding George is that our group wasn't more successful getting him out to do fun stuff while he was still relatively healthy.

George workshopped a short novel with us before he left for California, a book he'd written in the mid-seventies called *A League of Dragons*. It was the story of a young Sherlock Holmes' first meeting with Dr. Fu Manchu, and how Holmes acquired both his cocaine habit and

many of his deductive techniques during his period of imprisonment in China by the nefarious genius. He'd also written a sequel about Holmes and his friend Musgrave's trip back to England from the Orient, during which they encountered Captain Nemo and Alan Quartermain; with these two books, George had essentially written *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* twenty years before Alan Moore did.

Unfortunately, *A League of Dragons* had a cursed publishing history (or non-publishing history, actually). Rights were first purchased by an SF imprint of Avon Books, but the imprint was abolished before the book came out, and the rights were tied up for years. Another publisher then bid on the rights, but they were unable to secure permission from the Sir Arthur Conan Doyle estate to publish a work featuring Sherlock Holmes. After this double disappointment, the book sat in George's drawer for more than a decade, until he was able to interest a gaming company in publishing it as part of their spin-off novelization line. However, they wanted the book drastically cut, and they insisted that George rework it to feature some of their own copyrighted gaming characters. During his classes, George had always warned students away from work-for-hire, but he now sheepishly told us that such an arrangement was his best chance for seeing the book in print. He suffered through the supervision of a green first-time editor, a woman in her early twenties who insisted that George cut out Holmes' love interest (and one of the best characters in the novel, in the opinion of many workshop members).

George was bitterly disappointed by the editing process and being forced to shoehorn inferior characters into the book, but he needed the money. Since the early 1990s, subsequent to the publication of *The Exile Kiss* and *The Zork Chronicles* (another work-for-hire, game-based book, but a happier experience), George had been living primarily off income from stories written to order for theme anthologies (*Alternative Outlaws*; *Chicks in Chainmail*; and *War of the Worlds: Global Dispatches*, to name a few). This was due in part to a threatened lawsuit by a

local hospital which was attempting to recoup the costs of one of George's operations. For several years, all of his intellectual property was under threat of appropriation, including his Budayeen characters, so he had no incentive to finish the book which would've been most profitable for him: a fourth Marîd Audran novel. The lawsuit was finally dropped without ever having gone to court, freeing George to pursue a number of promising projects, but by that point, the number of productive months left to him was pathetically abbreviated. After George left for California, I eagerly awaited the publication of *A League of Dragons*, both because I'd helped critique it and because I'd loved his portrayal of Dr. Fu Manchu. The gaming company announced it, and Amazon.com listed it as an upcoming book, but the novel never appeared. The curse on *A League of Dragons* held fast, as effectively deadly as any poisonous deathtrap devised by the Oriental fiend himself. Which was a damned shame; even in adulterated form, the book was vintage George Alec Effinger.

George and Barbara Hambly lived together for a time in George's Magazine Street apartment in Uptown, where Barbara worked on her New Orleans historical novels. Then, in 1998, they decided to get married and move to Barbara's home in Los Angeles. Workshop members helped pack up George's enormous book collection. We all hoped this was the beginning of a new and much happier chapter in George's life, a time when he'd be able to return to the phenomenal productivity of his younger years. In Los Angeles, George found a way to bring in a steady paycheck fairly painlessly by working on the website for his favorite daytime drama, *As the World Turns*. We heard he was happy to be part of the big community of SF writers who lived in Southern California and attended big cons like Westercon. Meanwhile, our little group soldiered on in his absence. I'd just returned to writing again after a year-long layoff following my split from my first wife. Laura Joh Rowland picked up the group's managerial reins after George left, sending out monthly notices and ensuring that we didn't go

too far off track during our sessions. It felt like a good part of the group's soul had left with George; our three-hour sessions weren't nearly as amusing as they had been when he'd been cracking wise, and we definitely missed his keen insights, the richness of his lengthy experience, and his way of drilling right to the heart of a story problem. We hoped we'd get to see him once a year or so, when he and Barbara would return so she could do more research at the Historic New Orleans Collection and the Amistad Research Center.

The next time George returned to New Orleans, however, he returned to stay. His third marriage lasted only two years; even though he and Barbara never stopped loving each other (they spoke by phone nearly every day for the remainder of his life), they discovered they were unable to live together. With Barbara's help, he moved into an apartment on Chartres Street in the French Quarter, across from Ursulines Convent, in the summer of 2000. George made it to just one workshop meeting that fall. The group as a whole, plus various members, made attempts to get him out of his apartment, but he quickly returned to his old patterns of isolating himself. The two people who were most successful in getting to see him were his buddy Larry Gegenheimer and Dr. Jack Stocker, a chemist and SF fan who'd been a close friend and supporter of George's for many years. In November and December, George seemed to rally somewhat, and he promised that he'd attend our Christmas party, which I was hosting at my new house that year. I made plans with George that my girlfriend Dara would pick him up on her way over from the West Bank. Remembering earlier mishaps, I called him before having Dara head into the Quarter, but I failed to reach him. Later, at the party, Dara again offered to go get him, but we still weren't able to get him to pick up the phone. The party was a good one, as our Christmas parties usually were, but everyone thought George's failure to put in an appearance was an ominous sign.

It was. Barely a week into the new year, I came home to two disturbing messages on my

answering machine. The first was from Laura, who asked me to call her immediately. The second was from George, and it was barely understandable. He didn't sound good. One of the few things I was able to understand was that he'd been thinking of doing himself harm. I called Laura back. She told me that George had called her, not making much sense, but looking for my telephone number. I promised her I'd do my best to reach him and that I'd keep her informed. I reached George after several tries. His voice was slurred; whether from alcohol, pain medications, or other drugs, I couldn't tell. He told me how depressed he was, how he'd screwed up his life, how much he missed Barbara. I asked him if he was thinking of killing himself, because that was the message he'd left on my phone. He said no, he didn't remember saying that; he was just depressed, he said, and scared of what was going to happen now that his money was gone and he was about to be evicted.

I was scared, too. This wasn't the kind of situation I faced every day. I listened to George as long as he wanted to talk, then asked if he wanted me to come over. He said no, he didn't want to see anyone. I promised him I'd call him again very soon. I phoned a suicide prevention hotline and asked them what I should do. They gave me a list of social services agencies I could contact for George. I hardly knew where to begin. The depression and possible suicidal tendencies seemed like the most pressing issues, but there was also the fact that he was about to lose his apartment, that he hadn't written or brought in any income for months, and that he likely had a substance abuse problem to deal with.

I'll never know why George chose me to call on. I hadn't been his closest friend in the group, and we had rarely spoken beyond workshop matters and superficial social exchanges. Maybe he picked me because he remembered that I had a human services background and might have the kind of connections that could help him. Maybe he remembered that I'd recently been through a divorce myself and so might have some empathy for what he was going through.

Maybe he tried older friends first, but discovered that he'd drawn from those wells too many times already. Or maybe it was just the luck of the draw... maybe my name was the first to emerge from whatever fog he'd drifted into.

With Laura's help, I organized a "bucket brigade" of workshop friends to visit George on a daily basis. Sometimes he wouldn't let people into his apartment, but a good number of folks were successful in bringing him hot meals and groceries and periods of companionship. Meanwhile, I did my best to collect information regarding what services and financial assistance might be available. The true plight of a person without health insurance became fully apparent to me for the first time. George would potentially qualify for Medicaid and Supplemental Security Income (SSI), but getting him on the programs would take months, and there was also the problem of getting him to the programs' offices to fill out paperwork when he couldn't be convinced to leave his apartment.

Things came to a head. George went incommunicado again, and a visit to his apartment by Laura and Marty Rowland and me resulted in George being hospitalized. This wasn't a panacea, however. Although the hospital stay most likely saved his life, the administrators wouldn't keep him longer than three days once they discovered he didn't have any insurance. So the prolonged psychiatric and substance abuse treatment he needed was denied him. The hospital put him in a cab which deposited him back in his apartment, and it seemed we were all back at square one.

Not completely, though. George finally realized that if he continued going as he had been, he'd end up on the streets, or dead. He agreed that he should enter a residential treatment facility. This was far easier imagined than done, however. Nearly all such facilities are astoundingly expensive; they won't contemplate admitting a patient unless said patient either has good insurance or very deep pockets. George had neither.

It quickly became clear that there were only three facilities which both accepted indigent patients and might offer the range of services George needed. All three had very limited numbers of beds, so getting him into any of them was no sure thing. I took a personal day from work to take George for interviews at all three facilities. George was nervous but hopeful. One good sign was that he was showing renewed interest in his writing. Even though his desktop computer would have to go into storage with one of his friends, he hoped he'd be able to take his laptop with him wherever he was placed and get a jump on a new novel and some stories while he was in treatment.

The first place we visited was the Salvation Army's long-term facility on Jefferson Highway. It was a brand new facility, very clean and with excellent recreational facilities, and they had beds available. However, they didn't have any treatment professionals on staff; all treatment was faith-based. George clearly wasn't thrilled with the idea of compulsory sing-alongs with the choir on Sundays, and there was some question as to whether George would be physically capable of carrying out required duties in the warehouse adjoining the facility's large thrift store.

The next place we went had a reputation as a real boot camp, where residents had extremely limited spheres of personal freedom. Residents weren't allowed to read newspapers or magazines for their first several months on site, and George would not be permitted to have his laptop with him or to write about any subjects that weren't directly related to treatment. Additionally, the intake councilor was extremely iffy about George being appropriate for the program, due to his multitude of physical ailments. Option number two did not look promising; the best aspect of our visit there was that it made the Salvation Army and mandatory choir practice look appealing by comparison.

We went to La Madeleine Bistro for lunch. George's stomach couldn't tolerate much,

and they had a good variety of soups available. During my almost eight years of knowing him, this was one of only two times I shared a meal with George. He was more upbeat than I'd seen him since his return to New Orleans six months before. He told me stories about his childhood in Cleveland, where my father had also grown up. He told me it hadn't been easy being a science fiction writer in New Orleans during the 1970s and 1980s. Although the city had a reputation as a literary town, booksellers, newspaper book reviewers, and literary organizations had steered clear of science fiction, fantasy, and even horror in the days before Anne Rice's career caught fire. Chain bookstores and independents rarely invited George to do signings, even when his novels were nominated for and won the field's top awards. One memory that especially rankled him was that when he'd visited the Maple Street Bookshop, the city's premier independent bookseller, located only a mile or two from his Uptown apartments, their tiny SF section had been hidden behind the front door, completely out of sight whenever the store (and door) was open.

After lunch we went to our final appointment of the day, Bridge House, a substance abuse treatment facility located in a huge old house just outside downtown, in the Lower Garden District. Their program, based primarily on the twelve steps, seemed like a happy medium between the extremes of the first two facilities we'd visited. Work at the facility was mandatory, but they could make office work available for George, which would both accommodate his physical limitations and play to his skills. They were more flexible than the previous facility on the issue of George keeping a laptop, saying he could have one after he'd been at the facility for six weeks. Also, they made both job placements and supported residential placements available to graduates of the program.

George agreed that this was the best of the three. My stomach was in knots when the two of us went to the interview with the intake director. I was terribly afraid that they wouldn't have

a bed available before the date of George's eviction, or that they'd reject him on medical grounds. The interview lasted less than ten minutes. When it was over, the intake director, a grizzled but friendly middle-aged man who'd been a resident himself, said simply, "We'll take George." I couldn't have been happier (and more relieved) if my own kid had gotten into Harvard.

George moved into Bridge House three days later. Workshop friends came to his apartment and boxed up his possessions, saying they would store them until George could rent his own apartment again. I became custodian of George's computers and furniture. On our way over to the facility, we stopped into the Croissant D'Or Café so George could have a last cup of tea before starting treatment; it would be many weeks before he'd be allowed outside Bridge House, escorted or on his own.

The first couple of months, George worked the program hard. He quickly became a leader of one of the weekend twelve-step discussion sessions, which were also open to recovering addicts from outside Bridge House. Other residents, many of them criminals who'd opted for treatment rather than serving jail time, were impressed by George's publishing credentials. After a few weeks, George found the time to begin writing again, even though he had to do so in longhand, something he hadn't done since he was a teenager. I printed story and novel notes off his computer and brought them to him. Many workshop members visited him on Sundays, and Barbara also came to see him on one of her research trips. He was looking much healthier, due to his eating regular meals for the first time in nearly a year (even though he said he abhorred the food... the cooks, all residents, simply took whatever food items that were donated and turned them into stews, which other residents then ate between slices of bread).

One of George's first jobs at Bridge House was as afternoon and evening receptionist/doorman at a satellite residence building. This gave his visitors the opportunity to

sit and chat with him for long periods without being disturbed. This was much preferable to visiting him in the cafeteria, where as many as a half-dozen residents might be receiving visitors at the same time, frequently active children, and the television blared, and all the ambient noise made having a conversation with George (given his hearing limitations) almost impossible. At the satellite building, though, George returned to his old, spritely, witty self. We joked that his experiences at Bridge House would give him material for a dozen new novels. I brought in a book I'd won on eBay, a collection of photo portraits of science fiction writers, including George in his old Prytania Street apartment, and he told me that he'd owned the book, too. He'd succeeded in acquiring the autographs of nearly every writer in the book, with the sad exception of Fritz Leiber, who'd passed away right after the book came out. He talked about all the wonderful writers he'd known and befriended, the conventions he'd attended, and his feelings about his books, the critics' responses to them, and his awards. For years, the critics had pegged him as a marvelous short story writer who couldn't successfully pull off a novel; he was happy that he'd proven them wrong with his Budayeen books. Speaking about *When Gravity Fails*, he quipped that if he'd known sex and violence could make a book so popular, he would've stuck it into all his novels, starting with *What Entropy Means to Me*, and lived a comfortable life.

After those first couple of months, George began souring on Bridge House. His health may've had something to do with it. His various stomach ailments began seriously plaguing him again, and facility managers were having to drop him off more and more frequently at Charity Hospital, a state-run facility that he'd learned to be wary of, but the only game in town for an indigent patient not on Medicaid. Meanwhile, George had been pushed into new responsibilities after Bridge House's clerical support person was fired. He found himself typing up financial documents and composing grant applications for the director, and the added stress wasn't doing him any good. Also, his move into what looked like a managerial spot drove a wedge between

George and his fellow residents, some of whom began to view him in an unfriendly light.

George began expressing fears about what he interpreted as threats from other residents. Also, he complained that Bridge House was reneging on promises they'd made regarding outside job and residential placement, and he said that he'd seen evidence of gross mismanagement that he didn't want to have anything to do with.

About five months after he'd arrived, George was regularly asking his visiting friends if any of us would be willing to take him in. He wanted out of Bridge House. They wanted him out, too, apparently; according to him, they said his physical problems had progressed to a level of severity they were unwilling or unable to deal with. Serendipitously for George, a friend visited, not a member of our workshop, who offered him a room in her townhouse apartment in the suburbs.

George began participating in our workshop again. He was torn regarding which of two book projects he should finish first—*Word of Night*, the fourth Budayeen book, or a retelling of the Dracula story from Renfield's point of view. We helped him decide that the Budayeen novel would likely bring in a bigger advance faster. He gave us the first sections of *Word of Night* to read. It was wonderful to immerse myself in Marîd Audran's world again, to re-meet many of the old characters (including my favorite, Friedlander Bey) and plunge into the beginnings of a new murder mystery. George's writing was just as sharp, observant, and witty as it ever had been.

Then September 11, 2001 hit. It hit George especially hard, both because he had many good friends and good memories in New York City, and because he realized that any books having Arab or Muslim heroes were suddenly suspect in the marketplace. His agent seemed to bear this out when he told George that *Word of Night* might be a hard sell to publishers in the immediate future. I and other members of the workshop disagreed, saying that, on the contrary,

the attacks had sparked vast new interest in the world of Islam among Americans, and such a well thought out portrayal of that world, especially with appealing characters and a fast-moving plot, could sell briskly.

But George fell into another bout of depression. His friend in Metairie was no longer able to have him stay with her, so Jack Stocker helped George move into an efficiency apartment in the Bywater neighborhood, just off Elysian Fields Avenue. George missed our Christmas party, held that year at Laura's and Marty's home. He stopped showing up at our monthly workshops, and it became difficult for any of us to reach him. We started worrying again.

Yet just a few weeks later, early in 2002, he seemed to rally. Jack and Larry were able to visit with him again, and Jack began taking him out for weekly lunches. George put in an appearance at our March workshop and gave us a big hunk of his Renfield book to review. He said that, writing-wise, he hadn't felt this motivated and confident since he'd been in his mid-twenties. He was having fun with his writing again. Somewhere along the way, it had become a job, and he'd forgotten why he'd started doing it in the first place—because it had been the most fun activity he could imagine himself doing. Now it was flowing again, quickly and easily and powerfully. He would finish the Renfield book in just a few months, and then he'd go back to *Word of Night* and finish that. Concurrently, he was also writing stories for anthologies, stories that could bring in some quick cash to keep him afloat. He said his new goal was to become a Zen master of words, to pare back his writing style to the equivalent of the spare brush strokes of classic Japanese landscape painting. I was moving in precisely the opposite direction with my latest novel, *Calorie 3501* [aka *The Good Humor Man*], in which I piled metaphors atop similes in an enthusiastic paean to American archetypes and heroes. George didn't care for my latest submission, and he scolded me for my long-windedness. I shrugged my shoulders, telling myself we were aiming for differing effects. But inwardly, I was disappointed that he didn't like

my newest work as much as writing I'd shown him six years earlier. And, of course, George being George, I wondered if he wasn't right about my recent stuff.

George was eager to make the April meeting of the workshop so he could listen to our feedback on the Renfield chapters. He and Jack got the date wrong, however; they showed up one Wednesday too early and waited fruitlessly in a UNO classroom for the rest of us to show. The actual evening of the workshop, George was the one who didn't come. Jack told us that George was feeling under the weather that day, but he'd given Jack more chapters for us to read before the next meeting.

The Sunday following our workshop session, I took my soon-to-be fiancée Dara and her daughter Natalie to a church in Metairie to see a viewing of Laura's paintings. Laura's husband Marty was there, and so were Mark McCandless and John Webre from the workshop, along with their families. Laura didn't look well. Neither did any of our other friends. Laura pulled me aside, away from Dara and Natalie. She told me that George was dead. He'd died on Saturday, in his sleep.

The art show turned into an impromptu wake. All of us spent the next hour trading stories about George and commiserating over the fact that he'd been poised for such a dramatic comeback, and now that was denied him. I'm sorry to say that, after my initial bout of shock, I leaped to the worst possible conclusion—that George had fallen back into bad habits and died of an overdose. I was very pleased to have this assumption proven wrong. Over the next few days, through Jack, Barbara, and the *Times-Picayune's* obituary, the story gradually emerged. George's body had simply given out, after years of chronic illness and inadequate health care. Early Saturday morning, while he was sleeping, his stomach had massively hemorrhaged. He never woke up.

Jack, Larry, and Barbara were the last three people he'd spoken with during the two days

before his death. He'd told all of them that he was happy, that he felt some of his best days and best works were still ahead of him.

George's obituaries appeared in *The Cleveland Plain Dealer*, *The Boston Globe*, *The New York Times*, *The London Guardian* (whose version was especially thorough, focusing on his literary legacy), as well as the *Times-Picayune*. The website of SFWA, the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America, paid him tribute, and *Locus* featured scores of reminiscences and homages in both their print and online editions.

George hadn't wanted a funeral. But our group wanted to remember him in a special way. I spoke with Tom Lowenberg, owner of Octavia Books in Uptown New Orleans, located not far from where George had lived with Barbara before they'd left for Los Angeles to get married. I asked if he'd host a memorial reading for George and sell whichever of George's books were still in print. He immediately agreed, and we set the date for two weeks later. We publicized the event through the *Times-Picayune's* book pages and the *Locus* and SFWA websites and fliers stuck up in coffeehouses and bookstores around town.

Barbara flew in from Los Angeles, and Debbie Hodgkinson, George's girlfriend before he met Barbara, drove from Austin with another one of George's old friends. About forty people came to the reading. Debbie and I brought copies of George's books to display. Debbie also brought a framed photo, his publicity photo from the back cover of *When Gravity Fails*, which featured George dressed in a *kaffiyeh*, an Arab headdress, standing by the Algiers ferry landing opposite the French Quarter. Eight of us read from George's stories, novels, and poetry. Selections from *When Gravity Fails*, the introduction to *Word of Night*, parts of "The Aliens Who Knew, I Mean, *Everything*" and "Mars Needs Beatniks." I ended up playing M.C., and I felt inadequate, introducing those who'd been closest to George. But it was a deeply satisfying night. I think George would've been pleased with it; even at his memorial reading, his words

managed to make people laugh, right through their tears.

George is coming back into print now. Too late for him to enjoy it, but that's often the way these things work. Golden Gryphon Press will release a collection of his stories set in Marîd Audran's world, *Budayeen Nights*, in September 2003, timed to coincide with the World Science Fiction Convention in Montreal. They plan to follow up with at least two more collections, so it can be hoped that a good portion of his sterling short fiction will be made available again to fans new and old. Some publisher will see the sense in coming out with new editions of *When Gravity Fails* and its sequels, perhaps in omnibus form. And maybe even George's unfinished books, the ones he was working on so promisingly when he died, will someday see the light of day.

A few months after the memorial reading, I went to the Maple Street Bookshop, the store George had complained had hidden his books (and all the other SF) behind the front door. It's a charming store, located in a rambling old house not far from Tulane University. Its small rooms are crammed with bookshelves and piles of books, and its walls are covered with photographs of Louisiana authors who'd visited and read and signed their books there during the store's thirty-five-year history. The fence outside held a banner that alphabetically listed all the writers who'd ever had an event at the store. George's name was on the banner, so I searched the store's rooms for a photo of him. I didn't find one.

On my way out, just as I was about to open the screen door and walk out onto the porch, I surrendered to a funny little hunch. I swung the front door away from the wall. There, nailed to an almost bare bookshelf that held only a few tee-shirts with the store's logo, was the photo of George in his *kaffiyeh*, posing on the rocks by the Algiers ferry landing, arms crossed, defiant.