

Missing the Point

written by Holly

September 20, 2003

By Holly Lisle

So SFWA (the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America, putative professional organization for those named genres) has raised the rate for what it accepts as pro short fiction markets from .03 to .05 cents per word. I can understand, sort of. Looked at from a simply economic standpoint, it isn't unreasonable. After all, I think short fiction markets have been paying about that same amount since the forties and fifties, when that amount was actually something people might make a living on, if only barely. So, fine, now markets have to pay marginally better in order to be considered pro.

Only it isn't the markets that will change. Magazine fiction is not exactly in the midst of a Golden Age right now, and the few magazines that are hanging on are damned unlikely to raise their rates to meet the stipulations of an organization that has fallen increasingly out of publishing relevance.

I would almost guarantee that this rate hike is an attempt by SFWA to improve that relevance ... and it is about its own relevance that SFWA is missing the point. Because the real effect of the market rate hike will be to weed out from qualification a whole load of potential members in the very early, rocky phases of their careers. Which is something that SFWA keeps trying to do, from a lot of different angles.

During the ten years I was a member, SFWA chased its tale endlessly and to the frequent exclusion of all else on the question of who should qualify to be a member (though in all that frantic barking and racing it never forgot about its Nebula Awards; award-oriented members never passed up an opportunity to nominate each other for those, though the world fell down around them meantime). SFWA wants to have clout

again – the sort of clout it had during the Golden Age of SF, when most SF writers were members and where pissing off SFWA could have an actual effect on the bottom line for publishers. SFWA sees the way to regain that clout as to have lots of professional members – folks like me who make a living writing – and ONLY professional members. SFWA in its early years claimed the loyalty of a huge percentage of the publishing genre pros at the time, and it fought hard for better contracts, better payment, and other issues that mattered to them. Now it argues that if it demands more of the markets it considers professional, and manages at the same time to keep out writers it considers unworthy, it will somehow regain that clout.

But SFWA in its halcyon years **grew its own powerful members from wet-behind-the-ears kids**, and made them strong.

And they made SFWA strong.

Now, seeing only what SFWA became and not how it got there, the organization is working tirelessly to eliminate from membership the writers who need it most, and might most benefit by it – **and benefit it in return**. People who need SFWA or an organization like it need to be a part of it at some level BEFORE they make their first sale. They need to belong in an apprenticeship level right about the time they are finishing work regularly and are ready to start sending some of it out. It is at this point that writers make some heinous career mistakes (and in the early phases of a career, sales and the acquisition of agents can be as devastating as rejections, if they're the wrong sales, with the wrong contracts, to the wrong publishers or through the wrong agents. Publishing is a field that includes angels, devils, and slime-molds, and the slime-molds have a real affinity for newbie flesh.) By the time someone qualifies to join SFWA as it stands, (three short fiction sales to approved markets, or one novel sale to approved publisher in approved form – yeah, they've gotten picky), that writer no longer needs most of

what the organization is best designed to supply.

Instead, SFWA sacrifices newbies on the altar of “Not Good For Our Professional Image” and so marginalizes its own relevance and destroys the sort of loyalty it could engender by letting beginners in on the ground floor of their careers, teaching them how to BE professionals, and creating its own strength. To have real clout today, SFWA needs to represent a heavy majority of those working in its genre. It doesn't, and every petty squabble over who is good enough to wear the sacred SFWA crown weeds out more people like me who become embarrassed by its actions, and inactions.

I stuck around for ten years; I wanted to see the organization matter, and there are some damned fine people in it who could make a difference if the clamor of the elitists were not so loud. But I finally realized that SFWA had **chosen** to miss the point regarding what it could really be – not an organization that throws itself parties and gives itself awards, but a tough, down-and-dirty fighter looking toward the needs of its members in a publishing industry that is as vicious as it has ever been to the unprepared and unarmed.

Good little conservative though I am, I wanted to fight for writers. If SFWA ever goes to war again on behalf of SF and fantasy writers – including the beginners who need it most – I'll rejoin.

But I'm not much of a party hound.

Contents © Holly Lisle. <https://hollylisle.com> All Rights Reserved