

HALTON'S PEOPLE

Bad movie leads Neil to write his own

By LORI TAYLOR
Herald Staff Writer

Neil Williams' grade 8 teacher once told his parents he didn't have a creative bone in his body, but Neil had the last laugh recently when he sold one of his science fiction stories to Warner Brothers as the basis for a movie.

Neil, 21, is attending York University, where he plans to major in English and creative writing, with the possibility of going on for a Master's degree in Journalism. But his avocation is writing science fiction stories.

"Whenever I write for pleasure, it's science fiction," Neil said. "Whenever I have to do an assignment, I have to write what they assign. When I was in grade 8, my teacher told me and my parents that I didn't have a creative bone in my body. All the assignments were about to write a story about a hockey player, a horse or something."

"I had friends who also liked writing science fiction, who twisted the story assignments to science fiction, but I never thought of that."

Neil said he'd began writing science fiction stories when he was in grade seven, writing what he called space operas, like "Cattlear Galactica, or Ponderosa in Space", as he described the television program Battlestar Galactica.

"My grade 8 teacher caught me writing some science fiction in class one day and confiscated my notebook with my story ideas in it," Neil said.

"He kept it for two days, and called me in one afternoon to ask me why I couldn't write like that in my assignments for school."

Neil's sale of one of his stories to Warner Brothers came, as he described it, "by a great stroke of luck."

SF BOOM

"There was a boom in science fiction at the time, and a lot of interest in it because of the success of Star Wars," Neil said. "Normally I wouldn't have had a chance, since I don't have an agent."

The sale of the story to Warner Brothers had its beginnings in 1977, when Neil saw the movie "Starship Invaders", which was produced by Warner Brothers.

"On the way home, I was cursing about this rip-off movie, and saying to myself, 'I can do better than that,'" Neil said. "I went out and based about a 500-word story premise which I sent off to Warner Brothers with a nasty letter telling them their movie was rubbish."

"I heard from them two months later when they sent me a cheque for \$1,000 and a letter, which said they would like to meet me at their office in Toronto," Neil said. "So I promptly cashed the cheque and put it in the bank."

Warner Brothers told Neil they wanted some technical advice, and said one of their writers would be doing a script based on the story premise.

"As of that summer, Warner Brothers were planning to make a movie based on the

idea. Then in the fall, they contacted me to get some more information and said they would be making the idea into a television series," Neil said.

"By that time, they had changed the idea completely, so that the only part of the original idea that was left was the part about the spaceship crashing down to earth," he said. "Then they shelved the idea when Galactica went down the tubes, and as far as I know, it's still on the shelf."

MONSTERS KILLED

Neil said he thinks the general public still thinks of science fiction as it was in the 30's, 40's and 50's, with monsters who get killed off at the end of the film.

Even those in the film industry seem to be unaware that science fiction must have all the elements of drama, just the same as any other genre, and can't rely solely on two hours of special effects, he said.

"Things are changing since Star Wars, though," Neil said. "Although a lot of people in science fiction have criticized Star Wars, I would rather have people think science fiction is Star Wars than monsters. At least they're on the right track."

"If they have a bad idea to start with, with these movies there's not much a science fiction writer can do with it to make it any better by writing a good script. Star Trek was one of the few science fiction television shows that had science fiction writers doing the scripts."

Neil said he first became interested in science in 1968 with the launching of Apollo 8. For Christmas that year, his parents bought him a book which they thought was science fact. The book, "Expedition to Earth", by Arthur C. Clarke, was actually a science fiction novel.

"I'd read some kiddy science fiction, but I never thought of it as science fiction, just as a space story," Neil said. "I don't know all that much about science. From the time I was eight, until I was about 15, I planned to become a scientist so that helped, because I was studying sciences."

"HARD SCIENCES
Neil said he doesn't write many stories featuring what is known as "hard sciences"; these stories feature computers, rockets and other technology prominently. In "hard science" stories, the plot often hinges on a technological trick.

"I steer away from stories involving hard sciences because I can't keep up with computer technology and things like that," Neil said.

"My stories tend to be about people, and they concern more of the soft sciences, like psychology and sociology."

"I don't write near-future space travel stories, because you have to be up on methods of space propulsion," he said. "I write science fiction mysteries set in the near future, from 1990 to 2050 or thereabouts."

Neil's own reading tastes include some thrillers, but he reads mostly science fiction.

"For the past five years, I've been reading science fiction almost entirely, because I enjoy it so much, and because there's so much to keep up with," Neil said. "Otherwise, I'd find that a story I've written has already been done."

Asking a writer where he or she gets their ideas from usually leads to a blank stare and a vague answer. Neil said he gets ideas from some of the courses he's taking at university. In some cases, he comes up with a title for a story and writes a story to fit the title.

"Most of them I get just walking, and they just come to me, or I get them from something I read or see," he said. "Normally if I'm alone, in a coffee shop or something, I have a pad of paper and I start doodling, or writing letters or making notes."

WRITE IDEAS

"You have to write your ideas down, because you start getting several ideas, and you can't fully develop each one of them if you don't write them down as they come," Neil said. "You start forgetting good ideas."

Neil said he finds it difficult to discipline himself to sit down and write a story, if he knows it's going to be a long one, and especially if it's a rewrite. He rarely does rewrites, unless he has already submitted it to one of the science fiction magazines and received a rejection with recommended changes which might make the story more acceptable. The writing process can be easy or difficult, depending on the story.

"Once or twice, I've sat down at the typewriter and not known where I was going," Neil said. "I usually don't do a rough draft because my typing is so slow that I have plenty of

time to think of what's coming ahead."

Neil makes notes for most of his stories, outlining characters and designing locations.

"The longer I put off a story, the more notes I write," he said. "With the mystery stories I have to have notes. I figure out 'whodunnit', why and a general idea of how it's supposed to go in the middle."

"I usually get what I want the first time I write it," Neil said. "If I don't get what I want, I send it out anyway, and if it gets rejected by one of the big three magazines, I may change some parts."

Neil sends his stories out to five different magazines, the choice of which magazine for which story depending on the type of story he has written.

The five major science fiction magazines are Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction magazine, Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Adventure magazine, Analog, Amazing, and Fantasy and Science Fiction.

QUITE PLEASED

"I'm quite pleased with my progress in the past three years," Neil said. "Three years ago, I got to the point where my status had increased to getting rejection slips from the magazines with notes from the editor on the back, telling me what was wrong."

The price for stories in science fiction magazines nowadays varies from magazine to magazine. At Isaac Asimov's magazines, stories up to 7,000 words pay five cents a word. Between 7,000 and 11,000 words, the price is \$250 to \$300, and from 12,000 to 14,500, the price is three cents a word.

Neil doesn't write science fiction stories for the money, however.

"I do it for enjoyment, but in a way, I feel I have to," Neil said.



About the Hills

Assertiveness training

The Brampton Women's Centre will be offering a course in advanced assertiveness training in Georgetown. The five-week course includes assistance in coping with anger and stress, communicating feelings and setting priorities. For more information on the course, call 451-2393 or 456-1943.

Archivist speaks

Lee Brebner, archivist for Peel region, will be guest speaker at a meeting of the Esqueping Historical Society April 21 at 8 p.m. Mr. Brebner will explain the procedure for the establishment of a local archives. Members of other historical groups in the region have been invited to attend the meeting, which will be held at Knox Presbyterian Church in Georgetown. Members of the public are also welcome.



KEEP ON CLIMBING

Jason Stacey was one of the children who took advantage of the play equipment at Maple Nursery School Saturday morning during the open house. Parents talked to the teachers at the school while their children enjoyed the outdoor equipment and the other activities available.

Cancer can, must be beaten local society president says

By LORI TAYLOR
Herald Staff Writer

With statistics indicating that one person in three will contract some form of cancer during their lifetime, "you realize that you have to do something to help beat this disease," says Barb Skinner, president of the Georgetown branch of the Canadian Cancer Society.

"The Cancer Society is different from many organizations, because there are always patients who need the services we provide," she told The Herald this week.

April is Cancer Month, and the goal in Halton Hills is to raise \$38,000. Of that sum, almost \$7,000 will stay in this community to be used for services to patients.

Mrs. Skinner has been president of the local branch of the cancer society for five years. She first became involved about nine years ago when a friend asked her to canvass the street on which she lived. As a favor to another friend, June Magnuson, she took over the position of campaign chairman, a position about which "I knew absolutely nothing, but they sent me to the annual convention in Toronto for campaign chairmen, where you learn all about it."

Anne French was president of the society at the time, and she asked Mrs. Skinner to take the position of vice-president. Mrs. Skinner accepted the position, "and within nine months, Anne resigned and I was president."

Mrs. Skinner said one of her first responsibilities as presi-

dent was to find people to work as volunteers with the society. At the time she became president, there were only four people on the executive.

"We've always had a shortage of volunteers," Mrs. Skinner said. "It's just a matter of getting out to the people, because the people around here are very generous about helping out if you ask them."

NURSE'S WORK

"You're actually doing work like the Victorian Order of Nurses when it comes to assisting patients," Mrs. Skinner said. "It's not really much like volunteer work. I guess that's why it's so hard to get volunteers. You tell them about the work that's involved and you scare the hell out of them."

Among the services to patients provided by the cancer society are transportation to Princess Margaret Hospital for treatment, dressings, mastectomy visiting, and for patients in financial need, pain-relieving drugs, home nursing and housekeeping can be provided at no cost to the patient. Mrs. Skinner said she doesn't get discouraged about the hard work, but she does feel frustrated because people are unaware of the services the cancer society offers and do without them.

"I get frustrated because I don't think we're getting to all the cancer patients," she said. "Patients don't have to be referred to us by a doctor. They can call the office if they have a need."

"I know there are a lot of services we offer, and we're not getting all the patients,"

she continued. "For example, we provide nursing care and hospital equipment for terminally ill patients who want to die at home."

"I think we've done well getting to the number of patients we've had," Mrs. Skinner said.

The cancer society is very dependent on its annual month long fund-raising campaign, Mrs. Skinner said.

"You have to make people realize that there is no other financial support for this organization," she said. "I understand we belonged to the United Way once, but when they divided up the funds among the different organizations, it just wasn't enough for all our programs."

MAKE BEQUESTS

Mrs. Skinner pointed out that many people who make in memoriam bequests don't make donations to the canvassers when they call around. She said the in memoriam donations are usually in lieu of money which would be spent on flowers, and aren't really the same thing as making a donation when the canvasser calls.

Mrs. Skinner is leaving the presidency this year, and Mary Ellen Bridge will be assuming that position. As she looked back on her years as president, Mrs. Skinner said that the opening of the office for the cancer society on Wesleyan Street was one of her main accomplishments. With the office and being on a 24-hour-a-day answering service, patients can always contact the society, she said.

Another accomplishment she is proud of is of having been able to draw together a "truly devoted and talented executive".

"I never have to worry about my branch," Mrs. Skinner said. "They perform very well."

"There's a little something for everyone to do. If people

only have two or three hours a week, they can be stand-by canvassers in case someone has to drop out at the last minute, or they can sell knitting, or do some knitting. The girls even drop the wool off at the door for the knitters."

Continued on page 24



Cancer society president
Barb Skinner