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### *Mightier than the pen*

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1026 words

Mightier Than the Pen

by

Joe Haldeman

I've been a writer for forty years, and my attitude toward writing machines has never been simple. Right now I'm sitting in a quiet one-room cabin in the Maine woods, writing in natural light with a fountain pen into a bound blank book. I could have done that in the nineteenth century -- or five thousand years ago, if you trade the fountain pen for a quill or stylus.

But when the day's writing is done, I pull out my featherweight MacBook Air and type the words from the book into a text file. Then I port it over to NeoOffice to get a word count for the day.

I have various reasons to make it this complicated, but the main one is simple: that hand-written draft is a true first draft. You can name a computer file "first draft," but there's no way to prove it was the first. In fact, you would be a very strange writer if you didn't go back and forth, changing things, long before you finished the draft.

Why should that make any difference? Well, as a practical matter, sometimes you do get something right the first time. After a book's gone through a half-dozen rewrites, it doesn't hurt to look back and see whether the changes were all for the better.

There's also the archival and financial value of the physical document itself. Even for a moderately well known writer like myself, the holographic (hand-written) manuscript of a novel is worth thousands or tens of thousands of dollars. I've twice put hand-written drafts of short stories up on eBay, and collectors paid more than I got from the magazine that printed them! In addition, if you're egotistical enough to want your work to last after you die, it's not a bad strategy to leave behind lots of material for scholars -- so they'll write papers on you and force their students to buy your books.

I get a lot of esthetic, or at least craft, pleasure out of writing an actual book. In front of my window in this little cabin is a cup holding a dozen different fountain pens, and four different bottles of ink. Each combination has its own personality, and it's fun to start out the day making that small decision.

I've written about twenty books with this collaboration between pen and computer, and although I love my pens and blank books with hobbyist zeal, if I had to choose between them and the computer there would be no contest. The pens would have to go, even though they're so familiar they're like part of my hand. The computer is part of my brain. It has reconfigured me.

The first word processor I ever encountered was in Ireland in the late 70's, at the home of science fiction writer Harry Harrison.

It was rather large and slow, and kept records on audio tape cassettes, an unmusical sequence of tweedles and beeps. It was nevertheless fascinating. You could write a story onto a television screen, and then change it onscreen and record the changes on another audio tape, all without a single sheet of paper being sullied. When it was done, you could plug it into an electrical typewriter, and it would type it out at an amazing speed!

At that time in the U.S., there weren't any out-of-the-box word processors within the budget of a freelance writer. (Stephen King had an industrial-strength Wang with a screen on a robot arm coming down from the ceiling.) If you were good with hobbyist electronics, you could cobble something together from Ohio Scientific or Radio Shack. But like most writers, I had to wait until around 1980, when the Apple // came out. I bought one of the first, along with a printer about the size and weight of a VW Beetle. It used Doctor Memory as a word processor; the letters were all screaming capitals, with actual caps showing in eye-straining white-on-black.

By today's standards it was crude and slow, and it took a half-dozen big fragile floppy disks to store a novel. But what a feeling of power!

At least when it worked. You heard horror stories about a person touching the wrong key and losing an entire novel. I once lost a chapter by hitting "back-space" at the wrong time. I told my friends that this new machine was really great -- no mere electric typewriter could leap off your desk into a filing cabinet, and eat a chapter of your novel.

One triumphant day I forced the top off the Apple //, I think

voiding the warranty, and swapped out a couple of chips and soldered in a third-party component -- and suddenly I had lower case letters, black on white, just like a typewriter but infinitely malleable. From then on I was crawling up the beach, the fish gulping air becoming the lizard which becomes the mammal and then the ape. Sometime during the Age of Primates the Internet and Web got into the evolutionary stroll, and the computer was no more a fancy typewriter than a human is a fancy chimp. Writing is all about information -- gathering items, finding new relationships among them, and repackaging them -- and where we once had a roomful of books and a library card, now we can sit at a keyboard and access ten million libraries at any hour of day or night.

About fifteen discarded machines litter that evolutionary beach, and it's a long way from the Sinclair that whistled into a tape recorder to the superlight Frisbee of a Mac Air, which talks to satellites and brings a huge and complex universe into my rustic little shack. We were all science fiction writers, professional futurists, who stood around the table and were amused by Harry Harrison's new typewriter-with-a-TV. Not one of us had an inkling of how profoundly that toy was going to change our job, our lives; the very way we use our brains.

Evolution doesn't end. The ape became the human, and now the human is drawing pictures in the sand.