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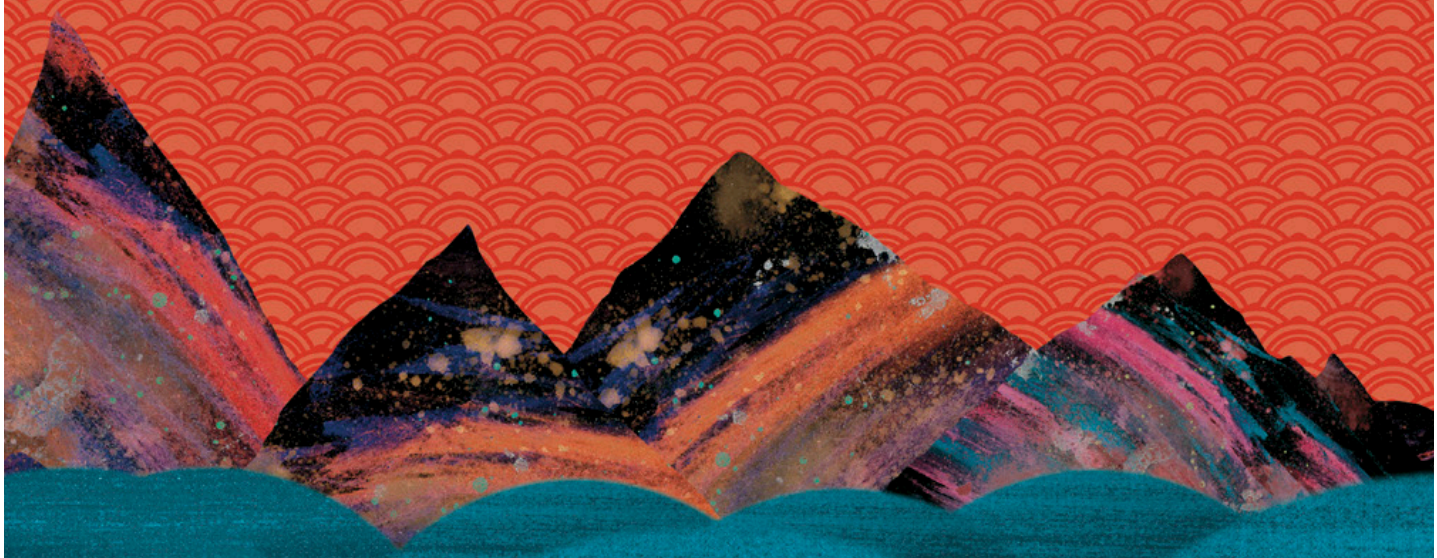
With all best wishes,

Jeff VanderMeer and Jeremy Zerfoss
(& Abrams Image)

WONDERBOOK

Dedicated to Erin Kennedy
and Jason Kennedy, with love.



Design by Jeremy Zerfoss,
Jeff VanderMeer, & John Coulthart

For my mom, my aunt, my long-suffering friends
and family, and for the free-texture community.
I love you all. – Jeremy Zerfoss

WONDERBOOK: AN ILLUSTRATED GUIDE TO CREATING IMAGINATIVE FICTION

JEFF VANDERMEER
ART BY JEREMY ZERFOSS
(AND MANY OTHERS)

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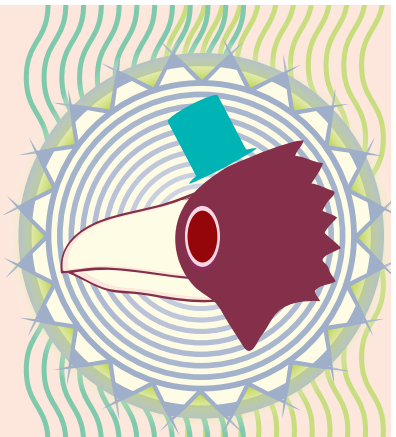
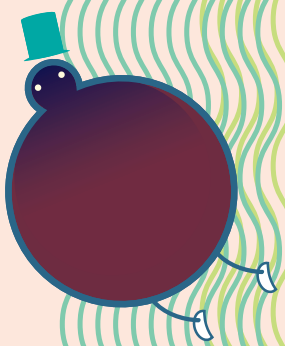
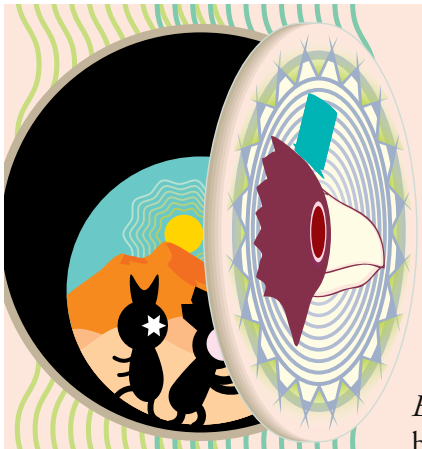
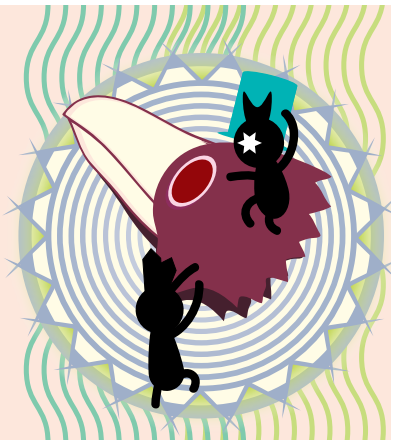
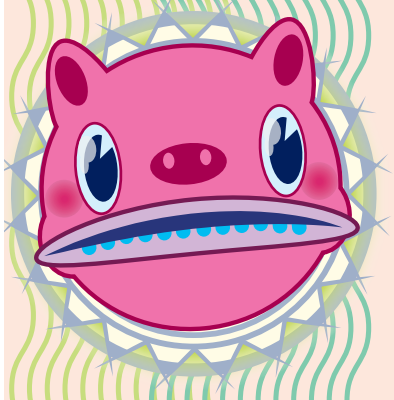
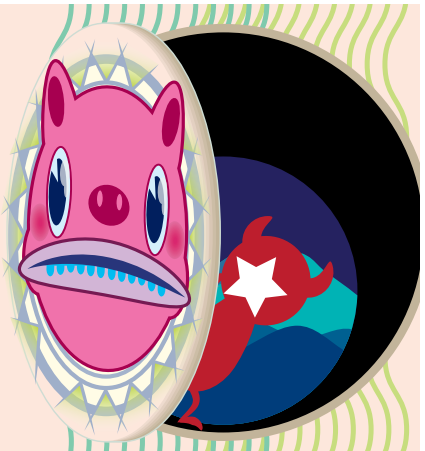


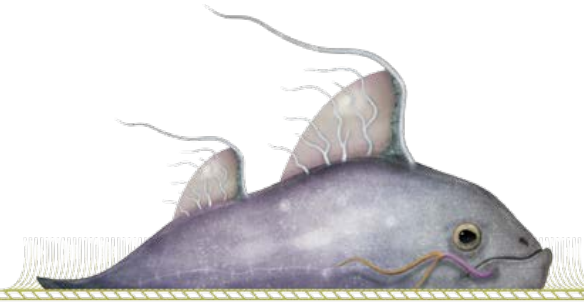










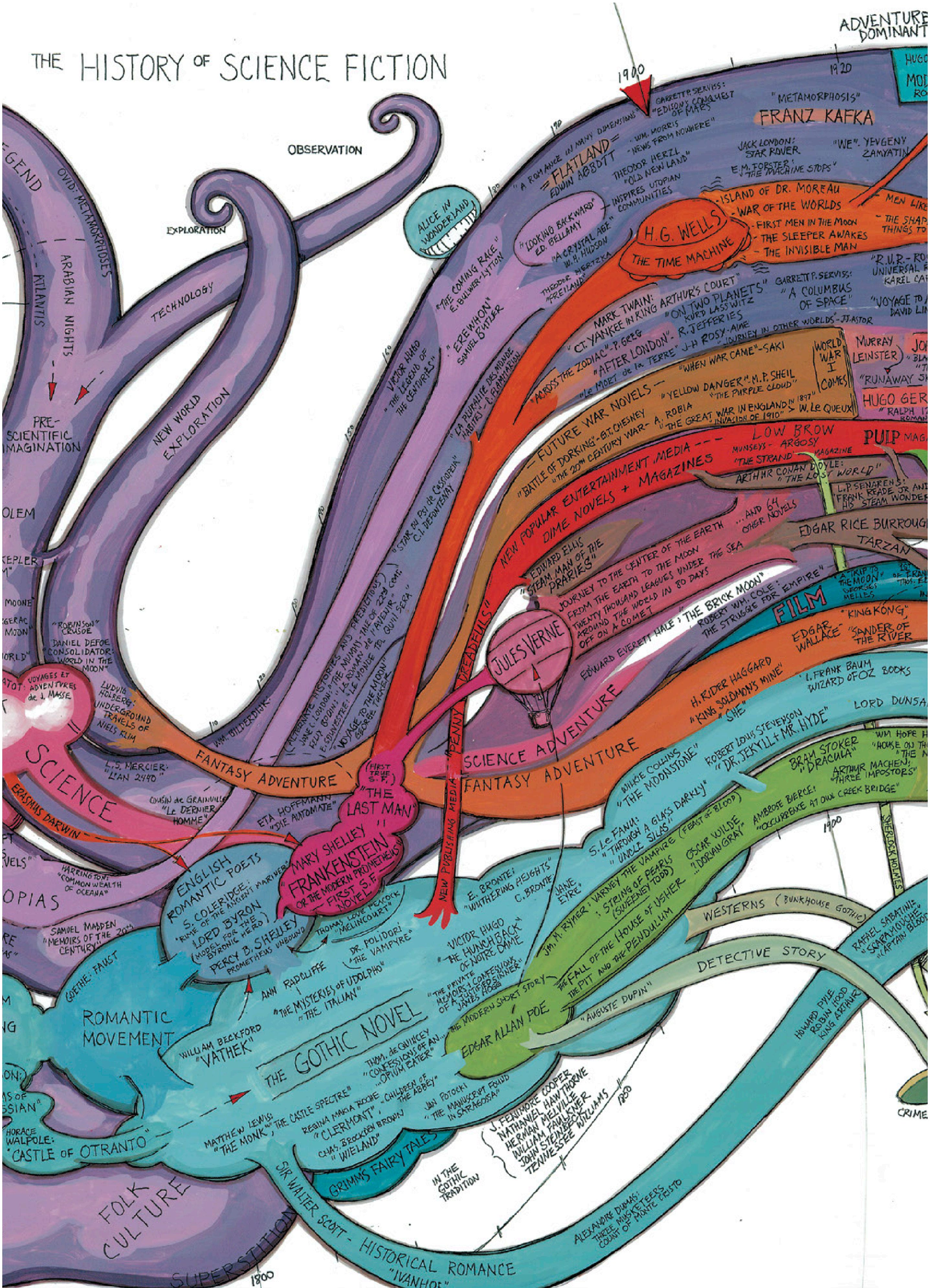


Welcome to Wonderbook. *Before you begin, check your supplies. Make sure you have plenty of water, food, and at least some mountaineering equipment. Get lots of sleep. Always carry pen and paper with you; you never know when that electronic device will give up the ghost. Remember, too, that knowledge of the languages of strange talking animals is a plus when going on a real adventure. So study up. And always—always—keep your wits about you. Now, strengthen your resolve . . . Ready? You're about to plunge into the middle of . . . everything.*

Introduction

As the painting opposite this page, "The Backyard," suggests, even the most mundane moments of our existence can be inhabited by hidden complexity and with wonder. Some of my favorite books on creative writing acknowledge that fiction is one way of making sense of a complex, often mysterious world, and that stories exist in every part of that world. The best of these books celebrate creativity but remain grounded in useful advice. They are practical, but they also elicit delight in the reader.

Which brings me to the book you hold in your hands. *Wonderbook* functions as a general guide to the art and craft of fiction first and foremost, but it is also meant to be a kind of cabinet of curiosities that stimulates your imagination. This book reflects my belief that an organic approach to writing should be coupled with systematic practice and testing to improve your fiction. You will also find that in *Wonderbook* I have eschewed workshop jargon and solutions that are too easy—*practical* solutions are another thing altogether. You should be able to pick up the basics of fiction writing from *Wonderbook* but also find that it challenges you from time to time with more advanced material. *Wonderbook* is also largely


THE HISTORY OF SCIENCE FICTION
ADVENTURE DOMINANT
OBSERVATION
EXPLORATION
TECHNOLOGY
NEW WORLD EXPLORATION
PRE-SCIENTIFIC IMAGINATION
LEGEND
OVID: METAMORPHOSES
ARABIAN NIGHTS
ATLANTIS
ALICE IN WONDERLAND
"THE COMING RACE" E. BULWER-LYTTON
"EREWHON" SAMUEL BUTLER
VICTOR HUGO "THE LEGEND OF THE CENTURIES"
"LA PLURALITÉ DES MONDES HABITÉS" - C. FLAMMARION
"STAR OU Psi de CASSIOPÉE" C.I. DEFONTENAY
"LOOKING BACKWARD" ED. BELLAMY
"A CRYSTAL AGE" W.H. HUDSON
THEODOR HERTZKA "FREILAND"
"A ROMANCE IN MANY DIMENSIONS" "FLATLAND" EDWIN ABBOTT
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GARRETT P. SERVISS: "EDISON'S CONQUEST OF MARS"
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1920
"METAMORPHOSIS" FRANZ KAFKA
JACK LONDON: STAR ROVER
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ISLAND OF DR. MOREAU
WAR OF THE WORLDS
FIRST MEN IN THE MOON
THE SLEEPER AWAKES
THE INVISIBLE MAN
MARK TWAIN: "CT. YANKEE IN KING ARTHUR'S COURT"
"ON TWO PLANETS" KURD LASSWITZ
"AFTER LONDON". R. JEFFERIES
"ACROSS THE ZODIAC" - P. GREG
"Le MORT de la TERRE" J-H ROSNY-AINE
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...AND 64 OTHER NOVELS
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WILKIE COLLINS "THE MOONSTONE"
BRAM STOKER "DRACULA"
WM HOPE H "HOUSE ON TH
ARTHUR MACHEN: "THREE IMPOSTORS"
S. LeFANU: "THROUGH A GLASS DARKLY" "UNCLE SILAS"
JM. M. RYMER: VARNEY THE VAMPIRE (FEAST OF BLOOD); STRING OF PEARLS (SWEENEY TODD)
OSCAR WILDE "DORIAN GRAY"
AMBROSE BIERCE: "OCCURRENCE AT OWL CREEK BRIDGE"
SHERLOCK HOLMES
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WILLIAM BECKFORD "VATHEK"
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THOM. de QUINCEY "CONFESSIONS OF AN OPIUM EATER"
MATTHEW LEWIS: "THE MONK", "THE CASTLE SPECTRE"
REGINA MARIA ROCHE "CLERMONT", "CHILDREN OF THE ABBEY"
CHAS. BROCKDEN BROWN "WIELAND"
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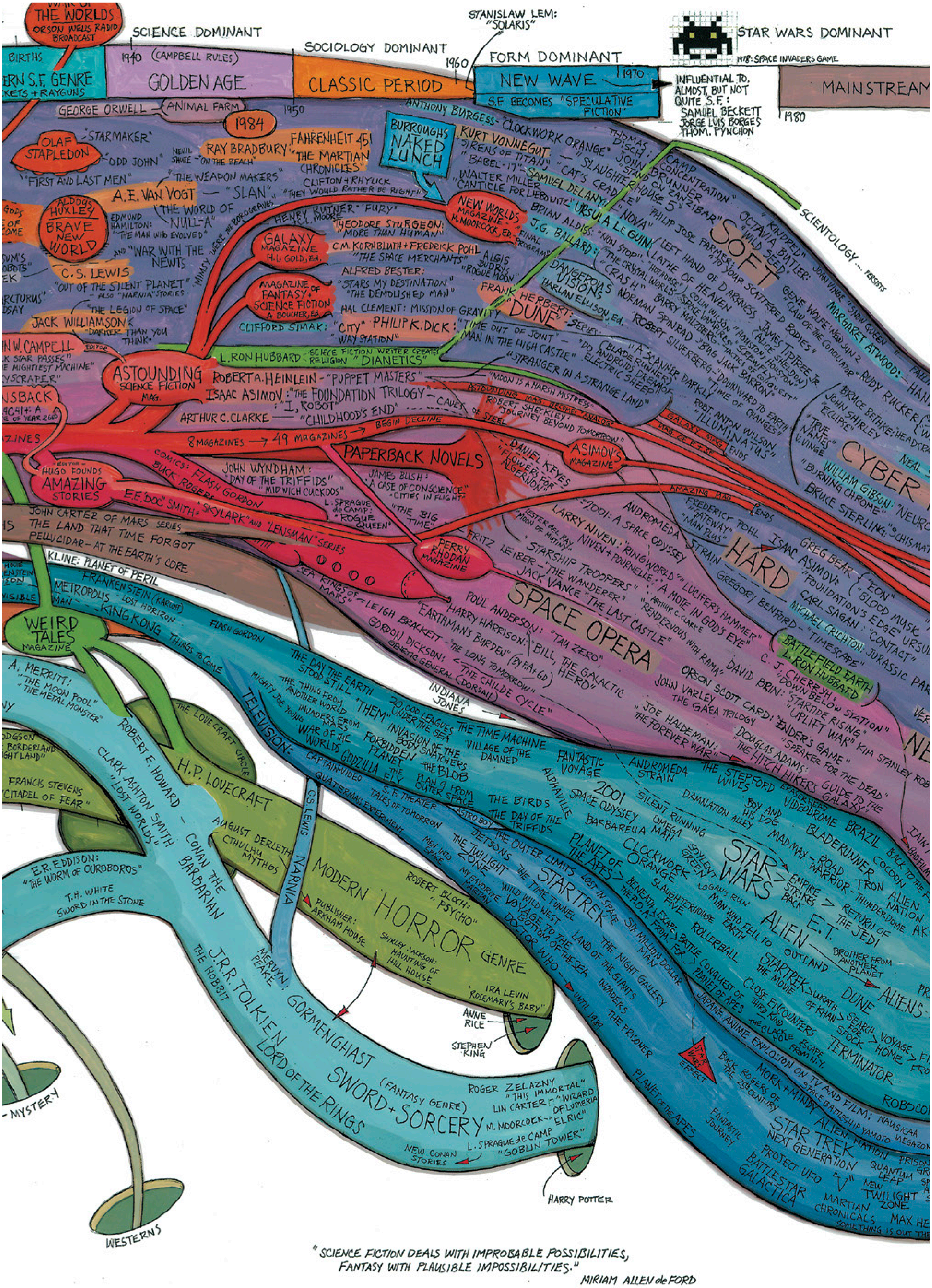


Art by Ward Shelley

nondenominational, in the sense that its approach to teaching technique has universal applications across both so-called "literary" and "commercial" fiction. Whether you want to write a heroic fantasy trilogy spanning centuries or a novel exploring a single day in the life of a lonely man—or, perhaps, something in between—you will find *Wonderbook* of use.

Unique Features

Wonderbook differs from most writing books in two distinct ways. First, images often replace or enhance instructional text. Although more than thirty artists have contributed their work, all of the diagrams were created by Jeremy Zerfoss from my sketches and concepts. This book may provide more instructional illustrations and other visual stimuli—both functional and decorative—than any other writing book to date. Images cannot always substitute for text, but they can be of tremendous use in helping to convey key concepts or in breaking down the complex into simple parts. My hope is that the results also engage your creativity.

"Fishhands" (2010) by Scott Eagle.

Second, although of use to beginner and intermediate writers working in any genre, *Wonderbook*'s default setting is fantasy rather than realism. Most general writing guides operate from a default of realistic fiction, while books on writing the fantastical often feel divorced from a whole spectrum of other species of storytelling. If you think of yourself as someone who writes fantasy, horror, science fiction, magic realism, or in any absurdist or surrealist mode, I hope that *Wonderbook* makes you feel as if you've come home. If you don't write in those modes, I think you'll discover a fresh way of looking at familiar subjects (as well as get a solid grounding in those basics I mentioned). You will probably also find that—in thought, theory, and execution—there is not much of a divide between "realistic" and "fantastical" fiction. Certainly, you find "imaginative" work across the entire spectrum of approaches to storytelling.

My own beginnings were in the literary mainstream but I soon found that my fiction tended to be more fantastical. I would give my fiction to friends and they would find surreal what I thought was quite realistic. My influences were from all modes of writing, and I came by my dual citizenship honestly. Then, too, my earliest experiences of the real world were, because of my family's travels, evidence of the ways in which the marvelous and the wonderfully strange permeate reality.

Whether it was encountering by flashlight a huge crown-of-thorns starfish on a reef off a Fijian island at night or, sick with asthma, watching with astonishment as two emerald-and-ruby hummingbirds mated on the wing outside our Cuzco hotel window, I had the sense that we lived in a place that required some deeper explanation, some chronicling that went beyond a faithful nonfiction account. Storytelling came out of my need to reconcile these experiences, and I chose fantasy in part because we moved through so many places that only by the combining of fragments of each could I find a true home. And only in fiction could I find a way to express the complexity and beauty—and sometimes horror—of the world.

Organization and Approach

Writer and teacher Matthew Cheney served as my consultant on the text. Several sections are much richer as the result of discussions we had while I wrote this book.

Although you can use it piecemeal, *Wonderbook* should be read from beginning to end for the most immersive experience. It is organized to first ground you in thoughts about inspiration and information on the elements of story—after which you will embark upon several different storytelling adventures. Chapters 3 through 6 present different entry points into fiction. Most writers are compelled to write after having come up with an interesting *beginning and/or ending* or, depending on how their brains work, after thinking about the story's *plot and structure*, *characters*, or *setting*. Throughout, I use "short story" and "novel" somewhat interchangeably in discussing technique, but I do try to emphasize one or the other where a topic or subtopic seems more applicable to a particular form. Much writing advice can be applied across both stories and novels, however, even if it manifests differently in each.

The approach used in each chapter varies somewhat to suit the subject matter. For example, Chapter 3 relies the most heavily on my own work. By dissecting a novel I wrote, I can show you the full range of choices available when writing the typical beginning, without having to rely on hypotheticals or trying to guess the rationale behind another writer's decisions. In the chapter on characterization, I tend to rely much more heavily on the dozens of interviews I conducted with some of my favorite writers for this book, interweaving their opinions with my own. The chapter on worldbuilding has fewer instructional diagrams and more examples in art and photographs of types of settings—the captions do much more heavy lifting. Tips on revision are intrinsic to the text of most chapters, but Chapter 7, Revision, directly addresses the subject and, again, uses the experiences of other writers. Consistency in this regard, or the rooting out of a sliver or two of inevitable repetition, is less important to me than providing what I hope is the best advice in the best context.

Such considerations do not apply, however, to the Workshop Appendix that follows the main chapters. The Workshop Appendix is unpredictable, volatile, and may well take you to some very strange places. It's meant more for dipping into

Guides to Help You Along the Way

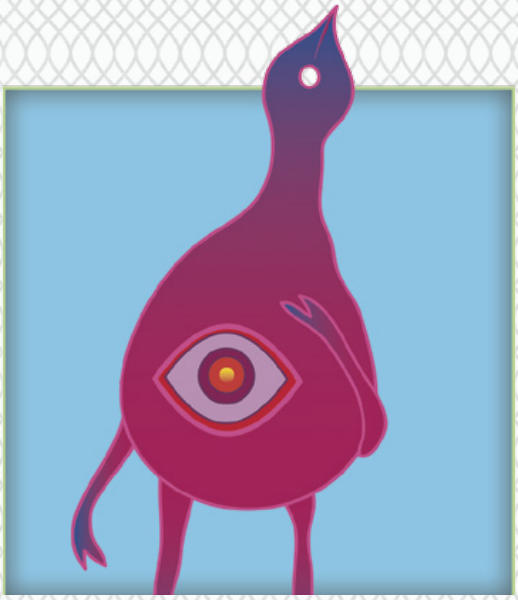
Wonderbook provides a variety of guides that educate, illuminate, and entertain: Myster Odd, the Little Aliens, the Devil's Advocate, the All-Seeing Pen-Eye, and the Webinator.

MYSTER ODD: "Think of me as that eccentric aunt or uncle who always makes a spectacular entrance at family gatherings and can never quite tell you what line of work they're in. But when you really listen, you find that they have interesting anecdotes and information to share. I'll be there to show you something useful. Flamboyantly. Mysteriously. Oh, and my gun? It's a water pistol."

LITTLE ALIENS: "We're the practical ones. Although sometimes we might just be taking a break and goofing off, most of the time we help explain the nuts and bolts of a concept or a term. We also help Myster Odd when old beak-head is trying to convey something really complex. We've come from a far-away planet to help, so make sure you pay attention—or you might wake up tied down like Gulliver."

THE DEVIL'S ADVOCATE: "I'm really just a different type of little worker alien. I'm the annoying one who offers a counterpoint to some information set out in a diagram or illustration. I help you hold two opposing ideas in your head at the same time, as well."

ALL-SEEING PEN-EYE: "I came with the little worker aliens, but unlike them, I serve one very specific purpose. Whenever I notice that your attention is flagging or that you're in need of extra stimuli, I suddenly jump out with a writing challenge related to the text you're reading.



WEBINATOR: "Some think of me as the most ordinary of the *Wonderbook* guides, but I perform a very valuable function. I pop up anytime you can find more content about a subject or writer at the *Wonderbook* website. You can use the site in conjunction with the book to enhance your experience. I may be small, but I hold multitudes."

I am a disruption dragon. My goal is to make you think about some aspect of the text. I delight in shaking things up a bit. But is that really a good idea? You'll have to decide for yourself. Me, I'm conflicted. — **Sincerely, The Disruption Dragon**

than reading straight through. Therein you will find complex writing exercises that will work you hard, along with additional perspectives on fiction from experts in live-action roleplaying and gaming, and an interview on craft with George R. R. Martin. Have fun—and don't get lost. Or do. Sometimes getting lost is the best part.

In addition to the main text, you will find supplemental special features that add depth to the chapters.

- Sidebar essays by other writers, including Neil Gaiman, Ursula K. Le Guin, and Lev Grossman. These essays are meant to provide additional information or to expand upon some subject in the main text. Most of these guest essays are original to *Wonderbook* and can be identified by their green frame.
- Sidebar features by me. These short essays provide further context, and are distinguished from those by other writers not just by the lack of a byline but also because they feature a blue, not green, frame.
- "Spotlight On" features. These short pieces consist of an extended quote from a single writer or other creator to convey something interesting about a very specific topic.
- "Writing Challenges" tied to specific images. These mini-exercises allow you to practice some aspect of the subject under discussion. Some are practical, but others are deliberately esoteric to help stretch your imagination. The writing challenges supplement the more complex Writing Exercises section in the Workshop Appendix.

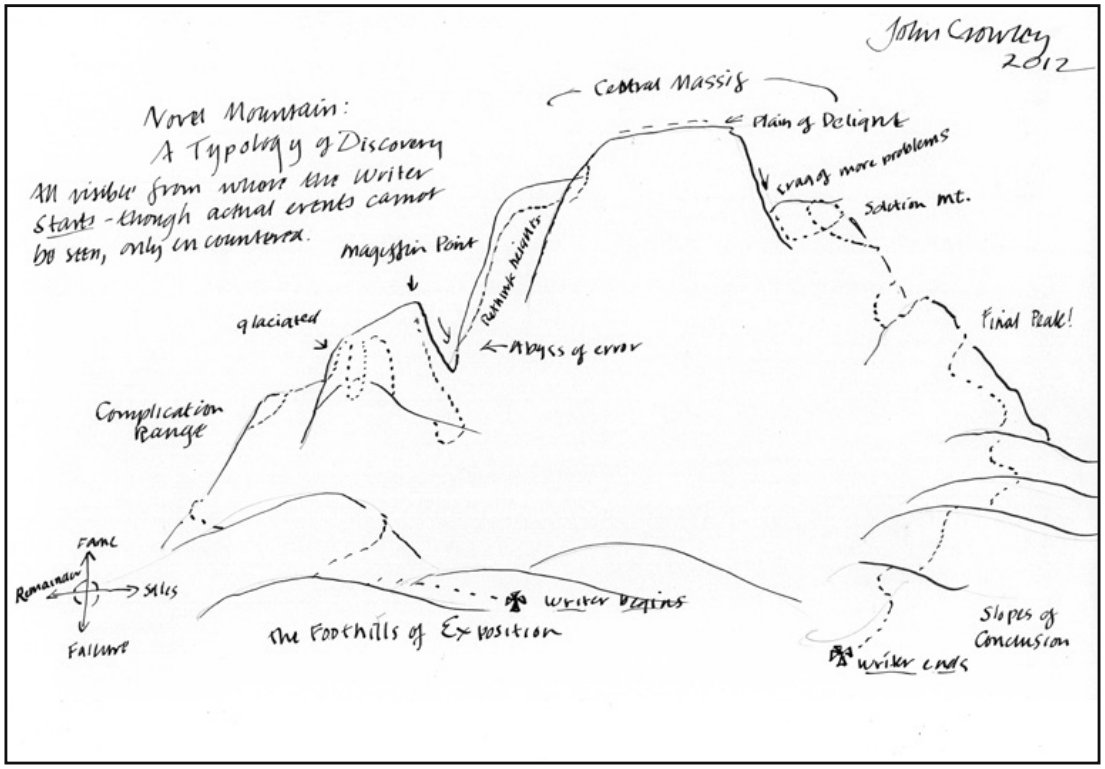
In the margin you will find:

- Blue text that defines terms or makes additional observations.
- Captions that identify images but sometimes also instruct.
- References to additional content online at Wonderbooknow.com.

You will also find a rather major disruption in the margins—in the form of a dragon. Disruption dragons feature ideas or thoughts by several excellent writers (all of whom I recommend highly to readers). These dragons either call into question something in the main text or expand on a point made in the main text. They are a kind of insurgency within *Wonderbook*, reminding us that engagement with what we read is more important than memorization of information.

Wonderbooknow.com

Additional materials related to the craft of writing exist at Wonderbooknow.com. The web icon used throughout the book references specific materials available there, but does not describe everything you can find on the site. One major supplement to this text is an editorial roundtable, wherein several respected fiction



editors read and critique a promising but flawed story. You'll also find a links section to additional resources supporting the writing workshop section of the appendix, the full text of the interviews from which I pulled quotes for this book, and much more. Everything on the site applies to the craft, or art, of writing. You can find more posts on craft—along with advice on careers and negotiating the modern publishing landscape—at Booklifenow.com, which supports my previous book, *Booklife: Strategies and Survival Tips for the 21st-Century Writer*.

The Journey

Writing can be a difficult profession, and it requires a certain amount of mental toughness, as John Crowley's sketch may suggest. There are many rewards, but setbacks also await you. Some of it you will just have to experience; some of it you can forestall with the right guides. A useful guide can take a few years off of your learning curve, as well. I hope that *Wonderbook* proves a faithful and honest companion throughout your long journey of becoming and remaining a writer. Where it is not true to your vision, you must follow your own path.

May your fiction bring you pleasure, fulfillment, and every good thing you desire. May you have fun, too. Lots of it.

FOLLOWING PAGE
"Shelves of Ideas for the Journey" (2010) by Scott Eagle.

Creative play and the imagination are at the core of a writer's life. How we nurture the imagination affects all aspects of what we write, and how we write it. As Jung said, "The dynamic principle of fantasy is play, which belongs also to the child, and as such it appears to be inconsistent with the principle of serious work. But without this playing with fantasy no creative work has ever yet come to birth."

Chapter 1: Inspiration and the Creative Life

The most miraculous aspect of creativity is the ability to conjure up images, characters, and narrative out of seemingly nothing: to be inspired and for that inspiration to lead to words on a page. This very process is, to my mind, fantastical at its core. Almost anything can feed the imagination with the raw material necessary for transformation into narrative. An image of a hummingbird on the wing, a typographical error in a newspaper article, a fragment of overheard speech, a memorable line in a novel. My wife once bit into a type of fruit she had not eaten since childhood, and a memory welled up of the fruit trees in her grandmother's backyard. Until that moment, she had not remembered those trees in many years, and all at once the stories about her grandmother spilled out, that one bite having unlocked a treasure trove of personal history.

"Inspiration" is often inadequately defined as the initial spark or sparks that lead to a story. In fact, the word describes a *continuing process* that occurs throughout the development of a particular piece of fiction—an ongoing series of revelations put together by your subconscious and conscious minds working in tandem. These revelations often take the form of connections between elements of the story. Examples include a crucial shift in the story because of a change in the relationship between two characters, a revelation about the setting, or even just the realization that one

scene isn't needed but another must be written. The fact that the woman with a gun at the story's beginning is actually a friend of your penguin protagonist, and they're not strangers to this place but coming home.

For some writers, these additional moments of "eureka" may never match the impact of those initial moments when the story first opened up to them—even though that spark can become a kind of sustained chain reaction. Indeed, writers usually find it easier to talk about technique, perspiration, and the *long slog* rather than inspiration. And maybe there's some truth to that approach. A lot of your days

Samuel Delany's workspace as documented by Kyle Cassidy (April 2009).

are spent slogging through the forced march necessary to complete a work of fiction. You can't be inspired every day, just like you can't be madly, deeply, insanely in love every day. But how such moments manifest as you move through the world and the world moves through you defines the core of your creativity.

In this chapter, you will find a series of views and perspectives on inspiration and the imagination that should be of use in encouraging a healthy, productive creative life. As you read, remember that we pull apart the act of inspiration and the act of writing only to talk about how they work. Further, because this chapter speaks to aspects of your core identity as a writer, these ideas come with a warning: When it

comes to your uniqueness and personal creativity, discard what doesn't resonate with you and use only what makes sense.

The Importance of Imaginative Play

Carol Bly's wonderful creative writing book *The Passionate, Accurate Story* includes this hypothetical situation: One night at dinner, a girl announces to her father and mother that a group of bears has moved in next door. In one scenario, the father says (and I paraphrase), "Bears? Don't be ridiculous," and tells his daughter to be more serious. In the other scenario, the father says, "Bears, huh? How many bears? Do you know their names? Do they have any hobbies? What do they wear?" And his daughter, with delight, tells him. Encouragement of the concept that bears have moved in next door highlights the role of creative play in fostering and strengthening the imagination—and thus practice at storytelling. It also emphasizes how creative play functions as communication. Even though I know she's just words on a page, I feel bad for the daughter whose father can't see that she's making an effort to talk to him, to build something together. (Therein lies a story, too.)

Bly's book also delves deeply into more practical subjects like the ethics of characters, and how this should govern their actions.

Bears figured prominently in our own household when my stepdaughter was growing up, invoked through the trickster aspect of our relationship. I had been feeding her lines of what one can only call tall tales or creative hogwash. For example, she would find a letter under her pillow from the "frog fairy," not the tooth fairy, with a couple of Chinese coins enclosed. The letter apologized for a lack of U.S. currency and explained that the exchange rate for teeth wasn't favorable right now.

"The Three Psychedelic Bears" by Jeremy Zerfoss.

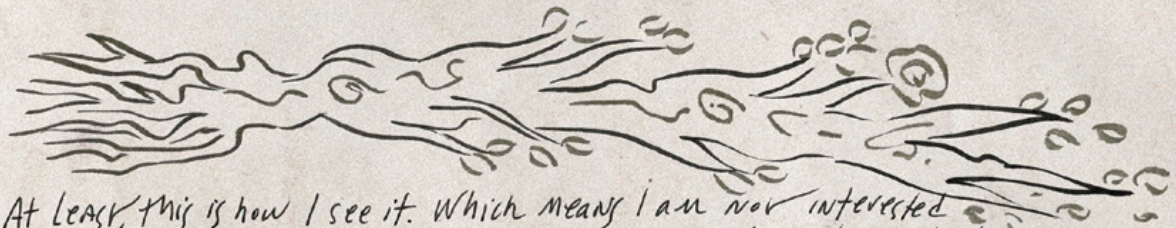
FOLLOWING PAGES
"The Muse" by Rikki Ducornet.

I think our species is wired to tell stories, just as we are wired to be curious, loving, playful. We tumble into the world with this extraordinary thing: a creative imagination. And it is erotic – inspirited by the breath of life. In other words, the impulse to create, is like the impulse to breathe. (Did you know that people who have been shut down often have trouble breathing?)

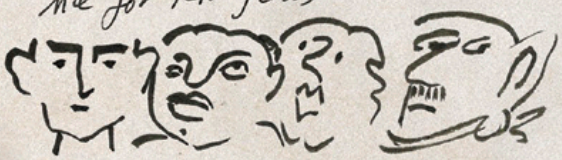
The imagination is often distrusted and feared – as much as it is misunderstood. Perhaps because it mirrors the world's mutability. It is supremely restless. It does not accept things as they "are." It is impatient with received ideas. In this way it is subversive. When the child asks "why" (the first great ✡COSMOGONIC QUESTION✡) and the parent says "Because I say so." that child has been betrayed. Perhaps we all carry a thorn from Kaspar Hauser's stolen crown. Perhaps we have all been betrayed somehow. Somehow compromised. Writing is a place to reclaim the initial impulse, to ask all the questions, to EXPLORE THE MYSTERIES OF BEING and BECOMING. Writing is a great adventure.

2

The fact that the adventure is often lonely doesn't mean it is narcissistic — a common (and lethal!) misunderstanding. The beautiful paradox of art is that what is a private journey is released to the world where it enters into the fabric of other lives.



At least, this is how I see it. Which means I am not interested in writing a book that has already been written. I want my book to teach me how to see the world differently. I want it to ask me vital questions, questions I never dreamed of asking. A novel is a great excuse to investigate things one knows all or too little about. Sometimes a book will stimulate a series of VIBRANT DREAMS. Sometimes a book will be ENGENDERED BY A DREAM: My first novel was precipitated by a dream of such power it sustained me for ten years and enabled me to write four novels in that time.



CHARACTERS have a WAY of intruding and demanding their OWN book! When that happens, you are in LUCK! YOU ARE IN GOOD HANDS!

I have no "SYSTEM" other than never taking the easy way out, not writing a book that bores me - not for an instant!; above all: writing a book I WANT to READ! Taking the path that has not been taken, seeing each book as A RIDDLE TO BE SOLVED, A RIDDLE and A REVELATION!

My WATCHWORDS ARE, HAVE ALWAYS been and will always be:

RIGOR + IMAGINATION

NIKKI DUCORNET

Finally, she decided to get back at me. She knew that I, an agnostic, was trying to learn more about her mother's Jewish faith. So during our first holiday season together she told me all about the glory that was the "Hanukkah Bear," and I wound up reciting these "facts" to the rabbi at my wife's synagogue—only to find out, much to everyone's amusement, that she had "punked" me. I wasn't mad at all; instead, I was impressed by the quality of her imagination. This imagination manifested in many other wonderful ways. When she pointed at a ferret while at a park and said, "long mouse," I didn't know if she was joking or finding the best description for an animal unknown to her, but I knew that detail would one day make it into a story.

We also teamed up for acts of creation. Once, when she had friends over, I asked her to "remember to find the iguana and feed him." We had no iguana, but that

"Ghost Iguana" by Ivica Stevanovic.

didn't stop Erin from picking up on the hint and looking for the iguana all over the house, much to the wide-eyed consternation of her friends. Later, I pretended a ghost of the now-dead iguana haunted us—a logical progression of its story arc, we thought, and no big deal, but somewhat problematic for other people. That ghost iguana, that Hanukkah Bear, stuck in my head for more than a decade; these characters led later to a novella entitled *Komodo* and to a galaxy-spanning science-fiction epic entitled *The Journals of Doctor Mormeck* that features huge, undead bears and a species of large, intelligent, dimension-hopping lizards.

When unburdened by the need to put words on a page, the imagination often appears as a form of love and sharing: playful, generous, and transformative. The best fiction is often driven by this invisible engine, which hums and purrs and sighs.

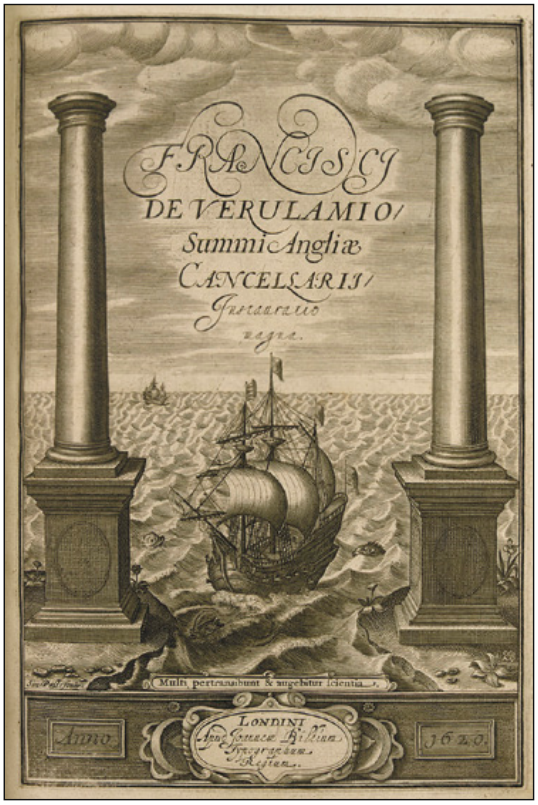
It's this flicker, or flutter, at the heart of good stories that animates them, and this movement—ever different, ever unpredictable—that makes each story unique. The more we allow it into our lives, the better, and the less we treat it just as a pack of lies, the more we're enriched. In a very real sense, too, the history of the world could be seen as an ongoing battle between good and bad imaginations—and the existence we have created on Earth is both sad and uplifting as a result. Your imagination and your stories exist within this wider context, and sometimes you'll find you need to break free of other people's imaginations to allow your own uniqueness to shine through.

Perhaps because the power and influence of the imagination is greater than we often think, our attitude toward it has sometimes been ambivalent. To take just one example from the world's cultures, during the Middle Ages in Europe the imagination was often associated with the senses and thus thought to be one of the links between human beings and animals. The Catholic Church believed the imagination was merely a mechanism for memorizing and internalizing the divine words of scripture—a lower mental activity. Representations of fantastical beasts tended to be in the context of Heaven and Hell as shown in illuminated manuscripts. The rise of the Grotesques—ribald Boschian images typically created by silversmiths and goldsmiths—may have added a greater sense of play and a corresponding lessened religious subtext at times, but they did little to lift the imagination out of the (blissful) gutter.

ABOVE Hell Mouth from the *Hours of Catherine of Cleves* (circa 1440).

BELOW The title page of Francis Bacon's *Novum Organum Scientiarum* or "New Instrument of Science" (1620).

Not until the Renaissance did the imagination become linked to the intellect, in part through what were known as *contes philosophiques* (philosophical stories). Based on the works of Francis Bacon and Johannes Kepler, these stories used fantasy to explain the Copernican universe. They usually took the form of an imaginary voyage or a dream story and allowed otherwise inexplicable travel through the solar system or deep into the Earth. Kepler's *Somnium*, for example, is a treatise on planetary motion disguised as a fantastical story about a witch's son transported by demons to the Moon.



Different forces are at work today with regard to the imagination. Modern ideals of functionality and the trend toward seamless design in our technology have taken the very human striving for perfection and given us the illusion of having attained it (which, ironically, seems very dehumanizing). In this environment, some writers second-guess their instincts and devalue the sense of play that infuses creative endeavors: "This antique Tiffany lamp must provide light right now, *even before I screw in the lightbulb and plug it in*, or it's worthless." At best the imagination can be seen as heat lightning with no real

ABOVE
John Coulthart's interpretation of Alice in Wonderland (2010).

OPPOSITE
Illuminated monsters in the margins of the *Luttrell Psalter*, British Library collection (circa 1325–1335).

A simple try-fail structure for the main character across three acts that has become a paint-by-numbers approach.

weight or effect, instead of *the source*. At worst, it's dismissed as frivolous and a waste of time, with no real-world applications.

To some extent, I understand the reasons for this attitude. Creative play speaks to an aspect of the imagination that defies easy measurement. It brings yet another level of uncertainty to an endeavor already saturated with the subjective. That truth can make writers and readers alike uncomfortable. The world wants to believe in technique and craft, in practice and hard work as the primary ingredients of success. Related to this idea is the cautionary tale about two writers. One had a brilliant imagination and the other a slightly lesser imagination, but Lesser had more tenacity and drive than Greater, so Greater failed while Lesser went on to a substantial career. There's rarely much follow-up discussion about Greater (and what might have been lost) after that point, except a kind of lingering subtext of pity for the one who couldn't quite handle it . . . perhaps because we fear being that person. Or perhaps because we sometimes look across the room at the looming shadow of our imagination curling back on us, and we realize we cannot control the at times uncomfortable things it can bring us. (The world is filled with people who have too much imagination solely because the people around them have too little.)

Inherent in this idea of "play" being immature and frivolous is the idea that, just like business processes, all creative processes should be efficient, timely, linear, organized, and easily summarized. *If it's not clearly a means to an end, it must be a waste of time*. In the worst creative writing books, this method is expressed in **seven-point plot outlines** and other easy shortcuts rather than as exercises to help encourage the organic development of your own approach. This kind of codification sometimes reflects a fear of the *uncertainty* of the imagination and the need to have a set of rules in place through which to understand the universe.

It's also a push back against the idea that a Hanukkah bear or ghost iguana might ever have creative value. *Bears should just be bears. Iguanas should be real.* An iguana is not a plot outline. Except, it *is* the beginning of a plot outline, because the creative process can begin anywhere and look like anything. The structure of a story can grow as easily from the way the residue at the bottom of a coffee cup resembles a continent as it can from reading a newspaper story about a heroic act. The most important thing is allowing the subconscious mind to engage in the kind of play that leads to making the connections necessary to create narrative.

The Fantastical and the Imagination

In considering the worth of "fantasy" and "science fiction"—modes of fiction still perceived as valuing concepts and settings over characters—this sense of imagination being "frivolous" is allied to society's ideas of what is "serious" versus what is "entertainment." Fantastical writers like Ursula K. Le Guin, Jorge Luis Borges, and Italo Calvino might be inextricably intertwining *play* with their exploration of complex *intellectual* ideas, but this aspect is often ignored in reviews, perhaps because it is considered irrelevant to the "point" of good fiction. Instead of being essential, core, *inseparable from*.

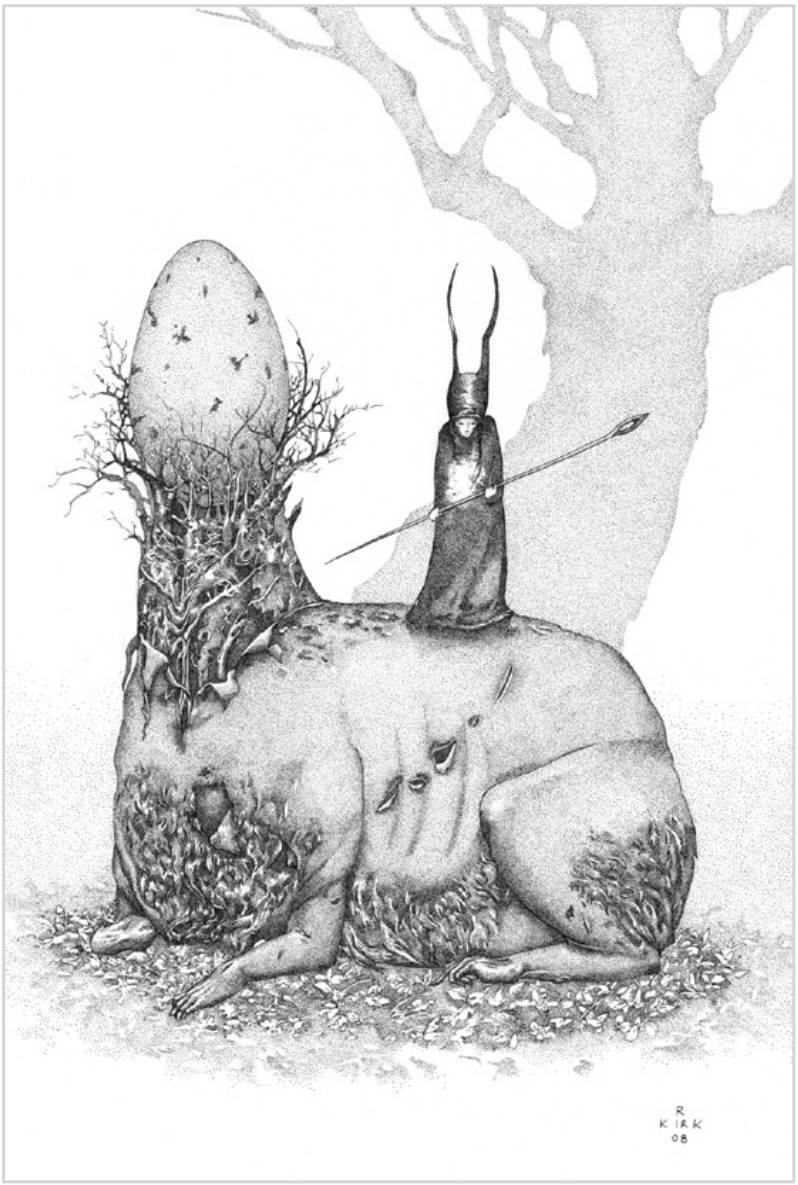
The word "frivolous" lurks in the subtext of such opinions, along with the assumption that flights of fantasy have no moorings to reality, a tether believed by some to be essential. Yet completely un-utilitarian fantastical "documents" like the famed *Codex Seraphinianus* (created by Luigi Serafini in the 1970s), the mysterious fifteenth-century Voynich Manuscript, or writer-artist Richard A. Kirk's "Iconoclast" imaginings have a marvelous intrinsic value no matter what we can actually glean from them. Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* may or may not include some interesting life lessons, but that is beside the point of the mathematical precision of its frivolity. As the award-winning Australian writer Lisa L. Hannett points out, "'frivolous' reading is as important as creative play. Reading for fun, reading to feed your imagination, reading to revel in the childlike wonder of being elsewhere."

Whether accepted by the mainstream like *Alice* or kept on the fringes like *The Codex*, these creations are among the greatest examples of pure imaginative play in fantasy. The *Codex*'s encyclopedia of images and text of an imaginary world, written using an invented language, has no practical value at all. The Voynich Manuscript, also written in a language no one has been able to decipher, contains botanical and astrological sections that are clearly fantastical no matter what the actual purpose of the document. It, too, exists for its own sake. Kirk's "Iconoclast" series has perhaps a more practical point to make, but just barely. It posits a strange alternate universe in which language is expressed through complex images. As a result, even the most basic communications take weeks; but since the participants "speak" in different styles, understanding is rudimentary at best and wars break out over inadequately expressed paintings. All of these ultimate expressions of the imagination share one thing in common, however. By existing at the outer edges of practicality, they expand the range of the possible for the rest of us.

But this idea of the fantastical imagination being *unmoored from reality* causes issues, too. It spreads the lie that fantasy has no causality, and it implicates the imagination in this crime. The subtext is that in fantasy fiction the sense of play that surrounds the fantastical

and leads directly to creation needs less shaping somehow—the attempt to convey an ordinary reality is more complex and messier—as if the ghost iguana needs no real transformation, just fleshing out. And yet the imagination isn't just responsible for—to take some random examples—talking alligators, a man as big as a county, a flying woman, or superheroes. It also can take credit for the alligator knowing the plot better than anyone and the flying woman having an admirer who ties her to the Earth, for knowing why the man as big as a county is weeping and that the superhero is going to have to get a job to pay the bills.

Even the issue of what is imaginative or fantastical can be misunderstood, especially by those who are overinvested in the tribalism of genre. Does it really matter if the imaginative impulse results in the "fantastical" in the sense of "containing an explicit fantastical event"? No. For one thing, "imaginative" writing occurs across every possible genre and subgenre. And for a certain kind of writer, a sense of fantastical play will always exist on the page.



PREVIOUS PAGES
Pages from the Voynich Manuscript (circa 1404–1438).

RIGHT
An image from Richard A. Kirk's "Iconoclast" series: translating language into art (2008).

When I asked one of our greatest writers, Haruki Murakami, about the surreal aspects of his work, he said: "It's not that I'm trying to introduce into the story surrealistic things and situations that I became aware of. I'm just trying to portray things that are real to me, myself, a little more realistically. However, the harder I try to realistically portray real things, the more the things that appear in my work have a tendency to become unreal. To put it another way, by viewing it through an unreal lens, the world looks more real."

This is often what we really mean by the *voice* of the writer. *Talking bears have moved in next door.* Does the reality matter more than the quality of the metaphor? Perhaps not. Consider Mark Helprin's *A Winter's Tale* and his World War I novel, *A Soldier of the Great War*. *A Winter's Tale* includes a winged horse and other fantastical flourishes. *A Soldier of the Great War* contains no fantastical elements, but through its descriptions, its voice, through Helprin's animating imagination, this novel takes on a fantastical aspect. Rikki Ducornet can write the lyrically phantasmagorical *Phosphor in Dreamland* as well as the intense, fiercely realistic story collection *The Word "Desire"* . . . and yet they exist in the same country, perhaps even come from the same area of that country. This is the power of one type of unusual imagination.

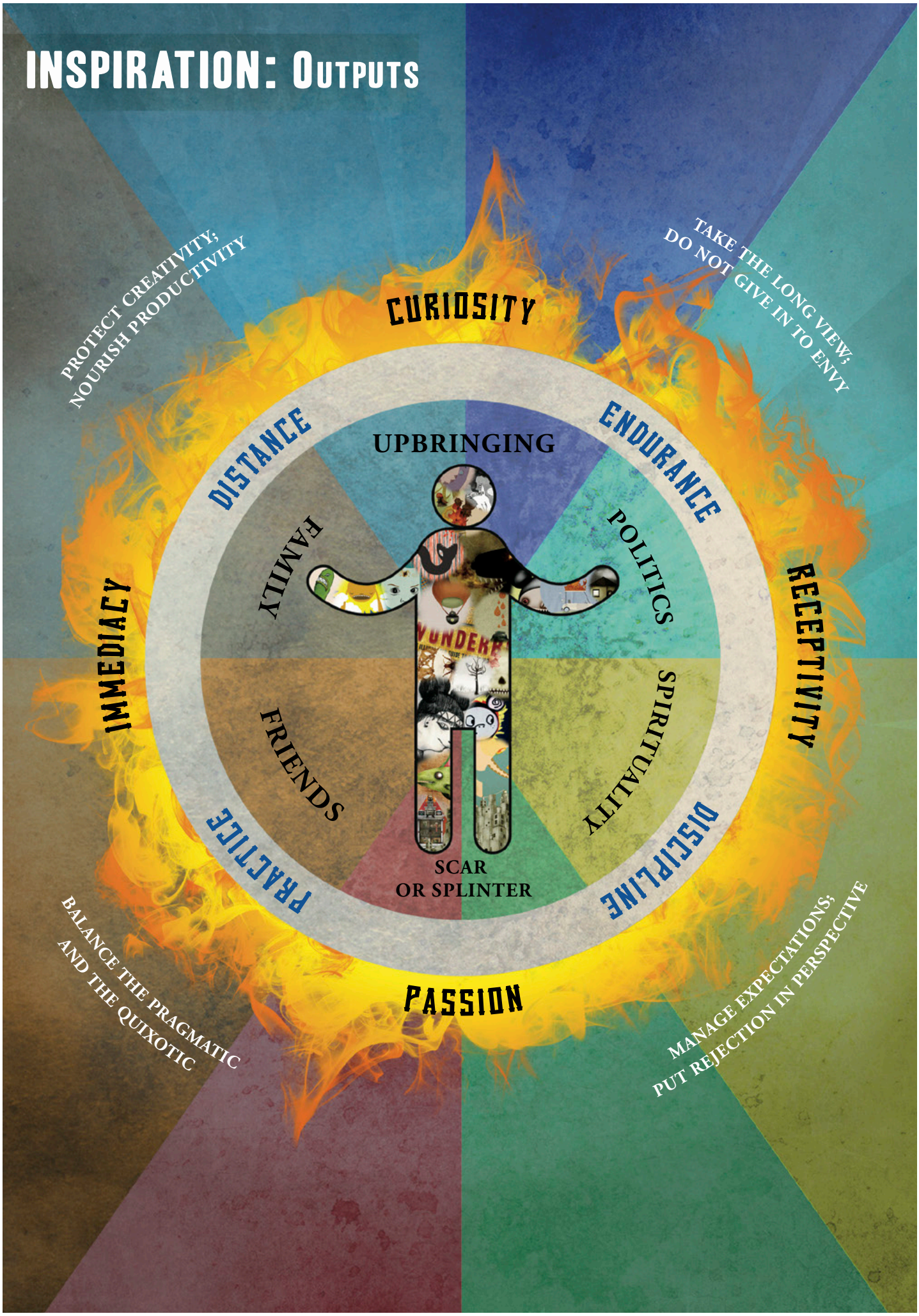
Imaginative Outputs

A few key attributes help to define and support your imagination. These traits exist in different proportions in different writers and affect every aspect of writing, but they first manifest in the arena of inspiration.

Curiosity. Nothing is more essential to a writer than sustaining an inquisitive nature—being actively interested in the world and the people in it. Curiosity reflects a willingness to be disappointed in a search for knowledge. Curiosity sends out a series of queries that exist for their own sake, and curiosity gathers back into itself anything that it finds, transforming what's found in the process. Truly curious people try to see everything as freshly as a child with an adult's mind. This gathering of information—of textures, of anecdotes, of smells, of histories—should be nonjudgmental and find pleasure in seemingly disparate, often contradictory elements. From the fusion of these elements comes an essential aspect of creativity. Curiosity is in a sense allied with qualities such as cleverness and with random collection—like a pack rat that accumulates buttons and bottle caps and scraps of paper without caring about the source of such items. Just because you're busy or you're convinced your daily environment no longer holds any surprises, don't forget to be curious about the world around you.

Receptivity. Openness and empathy spring from being receptive to the world and the people in it, not just being curious about them. Receptivity means letting in more than just information. Eliminating barriers to other people's emotions, predicaments, tragedies, and other aspects of the human condition is crucial to

INSPIRATION: Outputs



a writer, even when it hurts or makes you uncomfortable. As much as possible, allow yourself to be a raw nerve end that internalizes whatever is experienced in life. When you allow this, you not only create fertile soil for stories, novels, and nonfiction, you also build a better understanding of your fellow human beings. Putting up walls to avoid being hurt may temporarily solve problems in your life, but it may also shut you off from one potent source of your personal creativity. Your imagination needs curiosity and receptivity as fuel for both its serious and deeply unserious aspects. Being available to social media 24/7 does not count as receptivity; it's just fragmentation.

Passion. Cynics find it hard to be passionate about anything, and therefore passion is linked to retaining your idealism, which is in turn linked to retaining your openness. If you are not passionate about what you write—if you don't care—no amount of effort can revive your work. It will remain inert, waiting for an infusion of new life. Passion is the blood that fills the veins of your creative self. It provides for the circulatory system that allows your imagination to breathe. What is obsession but curiosity and passion taken to an extreme? But in the discipline of writing as opposed to "real life," obsession is an essential part of creating an enduring work of art. (In a dysfunctional situation, first you lose your curiosity, which turns off your receptivity, and that short-circuits your passion.)

Immediacy. Your imagination thrives best when you live in the moment and fully experience everything that is going on around you. Even a fantasy writer—especially a fantasy writer—requires stimuli from the surrounding world. Anything has the potential to be transformed or to provide the grace note of believability that makes a story a success or a failure. Being distracted from your environment is a direct hindrance to your imagination—it blocks receptivity, it redirects passion, and it ultimately channels your curiosity down well-worn and uninteresting paths. "Live in the moment" may be a cliché, but it is increasingly important to remind writers in the age of social media that you must be fully engaged to be a good writer.

These qualities do not exist in a vacuum. They are tempered, or given form and purpose, by other elements, foremost among them discipline and endurance. Without discipline, which translates in writing into focus and good work habits, your imagination can atrophy. Discipline balances the imagination by grounding the writer in pragmatism and structure. Discipline is learning craft, practicing craft, and, on the micro level, isolating the particular problems you need your imagination to solve.

Endurance, meanwhile, is toughness or *persistence* manifesting over time—the perfect writer in motion rather than inert, the potential for work expressed through work. Imagination and discipline create endurance—and long careers—by continually replenishing creativity, giving it form and reinforcing the writer's identity *as writer*.

Taken together, these attributes represent a continually refreshing and renewing cycle that feeds and nourishes your imagination. They are also qualities that will probably make you a more grounded and contented human being.

TIPS ON DISCIPLINE

Be careful that the scar doesn't swallow you whole or that the splinter doesn't pin you down. If you're feeling trapped, empathizing as fully as possible with the concerns of others could be what sets you free. – Brian Francis Slattery

The Scar or the Splinter

Another influence on creative behavior requires some additional explanation: the Scar. The contradiction in the Scar, the ghost of a wound, is that everything I have been setting out in this chapter has been about joy, openness, and generosity. So "Scar" is a strong word in that context, perhaps too strong, and I sometimes also call it the "Splinter." It is not the severity of the Scar or Splinter that helps define the depth of a person's creativity, but the way in which you use it. What's important is that some initial irritant, some kind of *galvanizing and enduring impulse*, combines with the need to communicate, to tell stories . . . leading to inspiration, then that first story, and all that follows after.

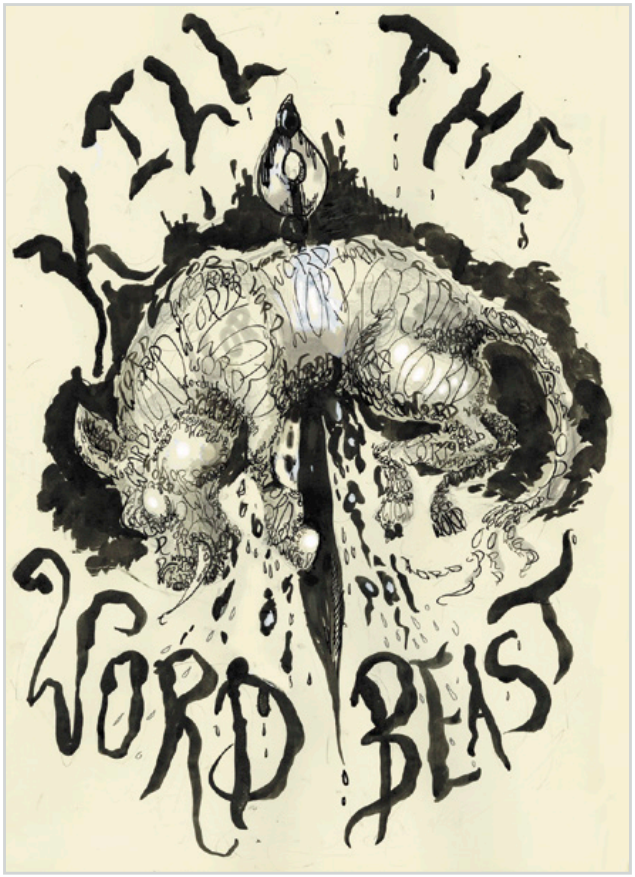
The Scar or Splinter is often the memory of a loss, a disappointment, a perceived great wrong that continues to create an agitation, an irritation, or at times an agony. In retreating to the Scar, it is only natural that the writer experiences emotions of sadness, regret, and loneliness—all of which feed into the writing. Negative emotions are also a key part of what inspires and drives most writers to write.

Although I love to tell stories, I am convinced I became a writer because of my parents' long, combative divorce when I was a child—made more horrifying by the contradiction between that ugliness and the beauty of Fiji, the island paradise where we lived. My particular Scar helped teach me to seek distance from events, to try to be on the outside looking in, to observe. In becoming a writer I channeled that distancing into art, rather than solely into alienation from friends and family. I had an outlet for those feelings and a practical application for that stance.

That is my Scar. But the Scar varies from writer to writer, can be greater or lesser, can be more or less personal. For new writer Jennifer Hsyu, her Scar is her "complicated, intercultural, and intergenerational relationship" with her mother. "I love her more than anything, but she is a classic domineering Chinese mother, and when I'm around her I regress into the rebellious teenage American daughter. The language barrier doesn't help either; there's anger and frustration and a love that is unconditional but often mutually born of loss (of understanding)." In her early stories, Hsyu was more "occupied with learning the craft than imbuing my stories with my point of view, but after one workshop she "went home for an extended visit, and I went with my mother to visit my grandmother, who suffers from dementia and lives in a nursing home and is the carbon print from which my mother came." Hsyu's devastating series of visits to the nursing home became a magic realism short story that combined "wishful thinking and painful reality." It was really awful to write, Hsyu said, because "it was hard to re-live those moments over and over again, searching for details and nuances of my mental and physical environment, and trying to maintain a respectable distance from my 'character.'" But she also had "never felt such a connection with the words on the page, because they came from somewhere within. Somewhere painful, of course—but genuine, and true."

This is a direct, specific example of a wound or Scar manifesting as fiction. But to some degree, too, despite its personal aspect, my Scar is just another entry point

into writing, a way into channeling the seriousness and depth of a character by recalling my own anger and sadness. Whenever I am moody and sit down to write, I am in a sense transforming something from my own life, the memory of the Scar hovering over me, and the writing is a way of drawing out the poison of memories. Even if it's not why I stayed a writer.



Word Beast by Molly Crabapple (2010).

Philip K. Dick Award finalist Karin Lowachee calls this all a form of method writing. "My writing of heavier subject matter—while not exact to my own experience—is pulled from those darker aspects of my life or personality, and the emotional truths are what I attempted to get on paper, and thus: method writing. An actor once said that acting to him was 'finding truths in imaginary circumstances,' and I think that applies equally to writers. Writers, to me, are very similar to actors in how they engage with their process and with the ultimate work. It's just that actors output through motion and speech, and writers output through the written word."

This idea can take many other forms, too. Lisa L. Hannett notes that "real-life yearning can work in the same way. Not necessarily romantic yearning, though that might be part of it, but the memory of unrequited desire, or the presence of as-yet-unfulfilled desire, or possibly the knowledge of never-to-be-fulfilled desire, which can be as creatively stimulating as the Scar. You *wish*, you *want*, you Yearn—these emotions can be channeled into your fiction, transformed; they, too, need to be communicated."

Inputs for Inspiration

As noted, your imagination feeds on almost anything, like the most greedy of omnivores, and anything can become narrative. The act of becoming a writer—of committing to learning the craft or art of writing—is largely about providing structure to what your imagination creates and is an ongoing process of attaining an elusive mastery (there is always another door). But generating these initial sparks is one of the few parts of writing that becomes easier as you gain more experience—as long

From the collection of Myrtle Von Damitz III, a note card by Cassandra N. Railsea (1970). A scene sketch for Railsea's novel *The Incredible Sex Life of Boggie Crisper* (1971).

as you don't suppress the impulse. Which is to say, if you reward your imagination by writing down your ideas and exploring them, even the slightest little fragment, your imagination will reward you with a more or less continuous stream of ideas. If you turn off or blunt the enthusiasm of your subconscious for engaging in creative play, the stream can dry up.

Over the years, I have learned to always keep pen and paper with me—even on the nightstand—so if I wake up in the middle of the night, there's as little time as possible between the idea and the recording of the idea. I sometimes type into a cell phone, but cell phone batteries can die and a cell phone can reset, wiping out notes, so I prefer pen and paper. I also don't wait on ceremony or politeness if I am with people and some idea comes to me—I just break off the conversation and scribble what needs scribbling. If you do observe the social niceties, you may well lose something important. Images, characters, fragments of dialogue are all incredibly vulnerable to erosion by your environment. I once wrote most of a long novel titled *Shriek: An Afterword* just by organizing scraps of paper that represented stray moments of inspiration; it never would have happened if I hadn't rigorously recorded every thought that came to me. The idea of doing so came from Vladimir Nabokov, who liked writing on note cards; he would put one thought or snippet of a scene on each card, and then he was able to organize them later into the book's order.

In terms of general categories of influence, here are just a few to make you think about where inspiration comes from:

- Family situations, anecdotes, or histories
- Work experience
- Travel
- Religion
- History/research
- Overheard conversations
- Friends
- Environment (including nature/the wilderness)
- Hobbies
- Other novels and stories
- Social or political issues
- Interest in a particular genre
- Science
- Newspaper and magazine articles
- Images (photographs, TV, movies)
- **Dreams**

As fodder, but be aware that dream logic usually isn't story logic. Dreams can be inspirational, but you usually can't transcribe them and come up with a story that makes sense to anyone but yourself.

How you process these influences tends to fall into one of the following categories:

- Direct observation and transference into your story (for example, the real detail that becomes the identical detail about one of your characters)
- In reaction to (for example, reading a science-fiction story and thinking you could do that concept better)
- Transformation (for example, a misheard fragment of conversation that lends itself to fantastical interpretation: "she's flying through the gates" becomes a flying woman)

Depending on the type of story or novel you're working on, you may find that almost anything in your environment will attach itself to the initial spark or inspiration, creating a series of secondary and tertiary sparks. When I wrote my multigenerational fantasy saga, *Shriek*, nothing in my environment was safe from being consumed by the novel. Everything from the particular tone of a woman's laugh to a newspaper headline immediately found a place in my narrative. At one point, I was writing during a concert, at a table in the back, and the way in which the lyrics of the band got into my head was written into a chapter in which the narrator, wandering, happens upon an impromptu concert.

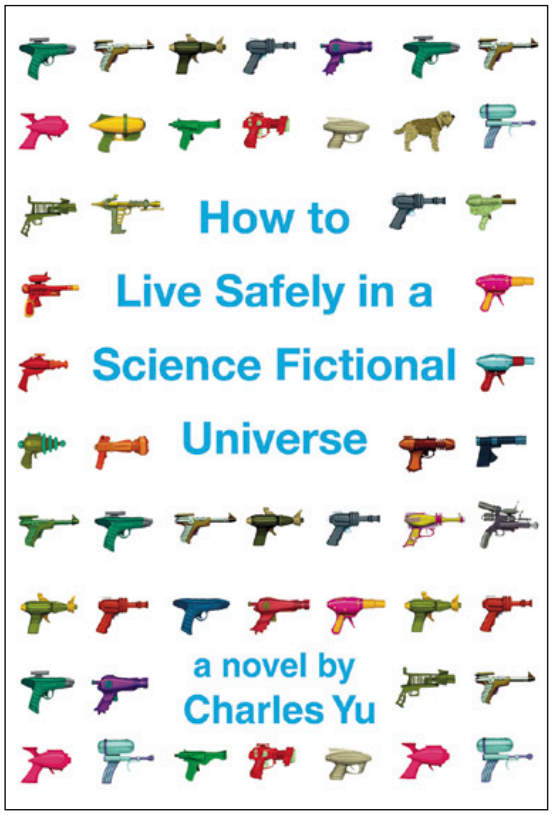
To give another example, the writer Kali Wallace, whose fiction has appeared in *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, among other periodicals, recently completed a novel about a modern teenager living in Ohio. She has "pulled in and used pieces of information I've collected in notes and scribbles from, among many other things, early medieval monastery rumors as described in a popular science book about the Little Ice Age, weird traditions in nineteenth-century European morgues, ancient Islamic mythology, and a single random factoid I learned from a *Criminal Minds* episode." Wallace stresses that the book "isn't *about* any of these things, not even remotely, and I was not reading/watching/thinking about any of those topics with

this story in mind, but of course that's exactly the point." She was reading about the Little Ice Age "because climatology interests me as a scientific topic, and at some point I scribbled down a note about what monks in England in the fourteenth century observed when the climate abruptly changed and it rained for five years straight, just because I thought it was weird and interesting." A few years later, Wallace figured out that this "one detail is exactly what I needed to add the right layer of history and depth to the modern fantasy world I was creating, in a story that has absolutely nothing to do with climate change and atmospheric physics."

The somewhat frightening and heady truth is that when you are in a certain mode of waking dream, of deep and sustained thought about your story, your mind can transform anything ***into your current project*** and make it work. But on a higher level, knowing what entry points into writing most appeal to you can help you channel inspiration. Here are just five such entry points:

Admittedly, the larger canvas of a novel usually can capture more elements without losing focus.

Write What Interests You. The received wisdom in many books and online articles is to write what you know. The problem with this advice is that what you know may not interest you, just as what you're talented at may not interest you as a career. A writer often has to be a kind of benevolent liar, to convince the reader he or she is an expert in the absence of real expertise. You can always find out what you do not know, but you can't fake that spark of curiosity that comes from being *interested* in something. Writing what interests you engages more than your imagination—it ensures that you can reconcile your writing and nonwriting lives. Besides, sometimes the mind needs to come at things sideways. If you write what interests you, you may find a way to write your way toward the things you know. The great fantasist Angela Carter, for example, wrote about her experiences in Japan at one point in her career and then later, after studying fairy tales, published the feminist collection *The Bloody Chamber*.



The hardcover jacket design for the North American edition of Charles Yu's first novel (2010).

Write What's Personal. If you feel compelled to write what you know, let what you know be personal. There's great cathartic power, and thus ample room for inspiration, in taking the events of your life (and, frankly, the lives of people close to you) and finding ways to fictionalize them. Writing what's personal is different from writing what you know because it emphasizes your stake in the fiction. The personal doesn't have to be weighty to spark fiction. Charles Yu's *How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe* includes a lot of smaller-scale personal details that helped inspire the larger, totally made-up story: "For instance, my father really is an engineer, and he has a very entrepreneurial spirit and is one of the most intellectually curious people I know. And my mother is a Buddhist, and she really

INSPIRATION: INPUTS

RECEPTIVITY IMAGINATION EMPATHY
CREATIVE PLAY LISTENING VISUALIZATION

* Wonderbook's visualization of the average writer

Scott Eagle's "Icarus Elck" (2013), inspired in part by Pieter Bruegel's Elck (1558) and the lines accompanying Bruegel's art, which read in part, "Everyone seeks himself in all things / Throughout the entire world; he is already damned; / How then can someone become lost / If everyone now always seeks himself?"

does worry a lot." However, recognize that confessional or deeply personal writing often requires time to gestate—that trying to write about events that you're still too close to may block inspiration. John Chu, whose work appears in publications such as the *Boston Review* and *Asimov's Science Fiction* magazine, notes that he couldn't engage with the material in his very personal story "Restore the Heart into Love" until "six years after my mom's death. Even then, I literally could not write the story unless I pulled a 'Hey, look, a spaceship!' every other scene."

Write What's Uncomfortable. Subjects that interest you on a personal or nonpersonal level may also trouble you. Either you shy away from a subject or an approach because you can't believe anything worthwhile can be written from that perspective, or because in writing about the subject you will reveal something you don't want to reveal to the world. The problem, then, is not with inspiration, but with your perception of audience. Here's the good news: You don't need to share what you write with *anyone*. Emily Dickinson didn't share much of anything while alive, and she's become immortal. If you are drawn to write what's

SPOTLIGHT ON **SCOTT EAGLE**

Studying the creative processes of people in different media can be of use to you as a writer. The change in perspective can help you view inspiration in a new light. The attempt to translate that process to writing can also be fruitful. Here are artist Scott Eagle's thoughts on creating "Icarus Elck":

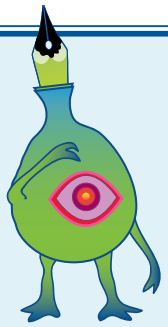
"For me, painting, or any type of making, is like having a teenage child, or being in a car wreck. If at that moment, someone stopped me and asked me to explain what was going on, or 'What does that mean?' the answer would quite simply be, 'If I survive this ordeal, I will let you know.' The name Elck alludes to Pieter Bruegel the Elder's drawings by the same name and means Everyman. The Bruegel print centers on the idea that each of us looks everywhere and projects ourselves onto all things in the vain attempt to find ourselves. The image of the man with a candle was found in a book of clip art. My personal associations for the man are: he seems to be searching for something; Max Ernst's collages; the alchemical pilgrim; Goethe's *Faust*. For me, this image represents the first step of the wanderer's journey toward a confrontation with the unknown and hopefully a sublimation of the antagonist through the realization of 'I am that.' The Icarus Elck series was a way for me to begin to confront the main antagonist in my work—the tornado. To greatly over-simplify, the tornado has come to represent the things I cannot control or predict. To confront the unpredictable both conceptually and through process, I decided to print archival digital images on top of painting, drawings, and prints on paper. The paper was either found or given to me, then repeatedly distressed through physical abuse, automatic drawing techniques, and collaborations with others. I then printed the digital image on top of this distressed paper, painting, collage, to form completely new and unique juxtapositions of forms and textures." ❧

uncomfortable, it may help to recognize that you are allowed to write *for yourself*, and that any decisions about seeking publication are separate from that first, fundamental decision (and freedom). Denying your attraction to the uncomfortable may result in thwarting inspiration. A good example of drawing strength from this mode of inspiration can be found in Caitlín R. Kiernan's recent novels, including *The Drowning Girl,* which has difficult autobiographical elements. Such fictions aren't just personal; they draw on elements of the writer's life that might be considered the most uncomfortable to give over to an audience.

Write What's Random. Some writers require chaos to find inspiration. You might be someone who needs a jolt to the system—who needs to tell yourself, on seeing a duck wearing a sun hat, being led on a leash by a child, "I need to write about that duck, that hat, that child." You don't require anything more than surprise and the unexpected moment for inspiration. That sudden shock—that introduction of chaos into the world—serves as the catalyst back into writing what's interesting, personal, or uncomfortable.

Write from External or Self-Generated Prompts. Some writers require order in the form of writing prompts to find inspiration. What are writing prompts? Self-imposed mechanical suggestions or suggestions from editors or other gatekeepers. For example, choosing a random photograph and building a story around it. In terms of external prompts, the

Molly Crabapple's visual adaptation of Salvador Dalí's "My Struggle," originally commissioned for the blog Brain Pickings (2012).



WRITING CHALLENGE

If suddenly confronted by an image like this from Jugend *magazine (c. 1900), could you create a story about it? Write one right now.*

amazing, award-winning Jeffrey Ford, collected in *The Oxford Book of American Short Stories*, often works best when he receives a request to write a story for a theme anthology. Perhaps he gains some essential element from the constraint of being told to "write about this," which challenges his storytelling chops. Sometimes, too, just being in a setting with a constraint helps fuel creativity. In one of the workshops run by me and my wife, Finnish writer Leena Likitalo wrote a prompt story entitled "The Watcher" that, virtually unchanged, was published in *Weird Tales*. Movements like Surrealism, and approaches to writing like the Oulipo school, provide ample opportunities to write from external prompts.

Each of these approaches is connected and can serve as an entry point to the others, like a honeycomb of interconnected tunnels. The mental trick for you is to consider how each entry point affects your ability to be inspired to write. Once beyond the initial spark, you'll find that you'll probably interweave inspiration from multiple entry points but that the way you perceive those possibilities has changed from indifferent or negative to positive. Over time, you may need to change your initial approach, however, because lack of inspiration often means your subconscious mind is bored—it needs a challenge.

You may also need to tweak the received wisdom of needing "distance" to write about something personal—you may find you need distance no matter what your initial inspiration. If research on a subject was your initial spark, you may, for example, need time to internalize what you've learned before you can write about it. Inherent in a concept like distance is that you must be receptive—internalizing the world, but also be *removed* from your subject matter to write about it effectively. You must be observant and aware but also allow some part of your brain to process stimuli in a writerly way.

As Pulitzer Prize winner Junot Díaz told me: "I've never been able to write directly about things that happen to me: I need to deform them in ways to make them strange to me, I need to change them enough so that I can 'play'—invent freely.

SURREALIST GAMES AND OULIPO WRITING EXERCISES

"Cognitive Transformation" by Ben Tolman (2004).

My art begins when I stop trying to be faithful to my life—if I'm playing the court stenographer, then there isn't going to be room for play, and if there is no room for play the work sits on the page lifeless. It's during the play that I come up with all the weird connections, when my subtle structures come to life, when what's best about the book starts to unfold."

Distance also includes the need for the writer to disengage to pursue the narrative forming in their heads. Karin Lowachee, for example, notes that she "daydreams a lot. Whether it's when I do menial tasks or sit on a subway or jog on a treadmill, I find this essential to do—and not necessarily to work out specific details of an idea or a story, but to allow myself to sink into the feel or the tone of an idea or a novel, to let my mind live in the world I'm trying to create, following incoherent threads of possibilities or just going over random conversations my characters might have, or situations without conversation. I go for walks in the summer that allow me to do something repetitive while letting my brain kite off. A naturopath doctor once told me that not all meditation requires sitting still and staring at a wall, that some people find peace through 'walking meditation.' It was an epiphany for me, and I realized that it was essential to my process."

It's important to remember, too, that personal inspiration can come from a shared cultural identity. Finnish writer Johanna Sinisalo, author of *Troll* among others, says that she "lived a substantial part of my life practically in the woods, and to a Finn the wild nature is never something to be afraid of—it's a source of nutrition, and adventure, a place of tranquility. A lot of my works are about the relationship between humankind and environment." Be aware of the general approaches you use to create a story; nurturing them is important not only to the quality of your writing but also to your peace of mind.

NATURE AND FICTION

What Is/What If: The Beauty of Mystery by Karen Lord

Karen Lord is a writer and research consultant in Barbados. Her first novel, Redemption in Indigo*, was nominated for the World Fantasy Award and won the Frank Collymore Literary Award, the William F. Crawford Award, and the Mythopoetic Award for Adult Literature. Lord's second novel,* The Best of All Possible Worlds*, was published by Del Rey in 2013.*

I am a writer—at least, that's what it says on my passport. It is a word that encompasses hobby, craft, vocation, and even drudgery. I find it a very broad career, especially when I turn from writing up research reports according to the expected professional format to plotting a minor character's development and significance within the larger story arc. Ultimately, whatever the style or the purpose, fiction or nonfiction, I work with words and get them to say what I want them to say. Sometimes I want them to communicate facts, other times I wish to convey truths, and occasionally I want to share the beauty of Mystery, which is no less poetic than the beauty of Truth.

There is both truth and mystery in the act of writing. It is true that writing is a skill like any other to be learned and practiced and improved on, and there are books, articles, and clichés that present as many rules and guidelines on style and story craft as any author could desire. But it is also a mystery—not a puzzle to be solved, nor merely a process to be analyzed and applied, but a mystery that cannot be explained, only tried and experienced. For writing a report, "write what you know" is simple, practical, and useful advice, but for writing fiction that directive is insufficient. It is possible to make facts into fiction—for example, directly translating a life event or a scientific discovery into a plot point—but writers also celebrate the ability to tell tales about things beyond their ken.

Fiction is both process and mystery, knowledge and imagination. It lies somewhere on a spectrum that begins with poetry and ends with statistics. It is art. It takes the forms and shapes of the real world and re-views them with new perception: the shade, texture, and weight of the subconscious and the unreal.

Various stories can be told using only what you know. Jane Austen wrote what she knew from her own life and the lives around her: a music box of a world with familiar society characters dancing to a familiar wedding burden. An intimate knowledge and a small stage can provide enough material for a story. A sufficiently self-aware and observant writer should be able to convincingly depict love, loss, family, childhood, growing up, growing old—in other words, the experience of becoming and being a human among other humans. It is the literary equivalent of a still life: the portrayal of everyday things in a familiar setting.

Knowledge traces the outline, but adding unusual texture and color to that outline creates the variation that makes fiction more than mere retelling. Breaking into the unexpected and the unknown transforms a photo-realist image into the dreamy blur of an impressionist painting, or the edged, off-kilter planes of a Cubist sketch. This is art's paradox: Images unseeable from the vantage point of so-called "real life" may be more evocative of the real than the real itself. Similarly, art that uses the medium of the printed page requires more than unvarnished facts to illuminate truths.

Mary Shelley wrote what she did not know, what could not be known at that moment in history. She took the hypothesis of galvanism and the process of dissection, then added speculation, drama, and fear. It was no mere vivification of a lifeless human body, no tame laboratory filled with bored student

assistants, but a lone genius assembling limbs and organs left over from dissections and re-enchanting them with the primeval force of raw lightning. She revisited Austen's familiar tale of courting, the search for a helpmeet in the manner approved by society, and converted it into the tragedy of a Creature who should never have been made and a Bride who would never be wed.

Was Shelley truly writing the unknown? She was pregnant at the time of writing and had already suffered through the death of a child. She had the experience of being a Victor Frankenstein, assembling a Creature and being somehow a part of whatever miracle put life and soul into the gathered flesh, blood, and bone. But she had also witnessed the reverse, when life and soul depart and cannot be recalled—neither by lightning nor desperation. She was unmarried, shunned by a conservative society, attached to a man whose behavior proved he was not made for monogamy. She would have understood the longing for a spouse and a family, and the destruction of that hope. She fractured what she had known and scattered the small pieces until the picture no longer resembled her life. Then she took those fragments of experience and reassembled them into a newly imagined creation.

Shelley's method contained multitudes of knowledge, and she used that knowledge to push hard at the secure boundaries of the norm. The reader is kept engaged by the tension that comes from the resulting uncertainty, the breaking of rules, and the realization that the author is quite willing to leave you—not at the altar, which would still be within expectations, but stranded on an ice floe at the edge of the known world.

I may be showing a bias toward speculative fiction by pitting Frankenstein against Mr. Darcy, but I believe I can partly defend my choice. Throughout history, every human society has examined its dreams and nightmares through the filter of *what-if*, both playful nonsense and grim paranoia. Grappling with the unknowable has produced fairy tales and scriptures and even literature. Of course not every author uses the speculative as part of their writer's tool kit. The unknowable need not be supernatural; it can be either realist or fantastical. What is key is that it should have a level of communion with the known. A fictional character can represent a life drawn differently, a parallel-universe self diverted by time or crisis or a different choice of career. That character's story can be entirely rooted in observed reality. It is perfectly valid and no less transformational that a character should become a father or a prisoner rather than a wizard or a beetle.

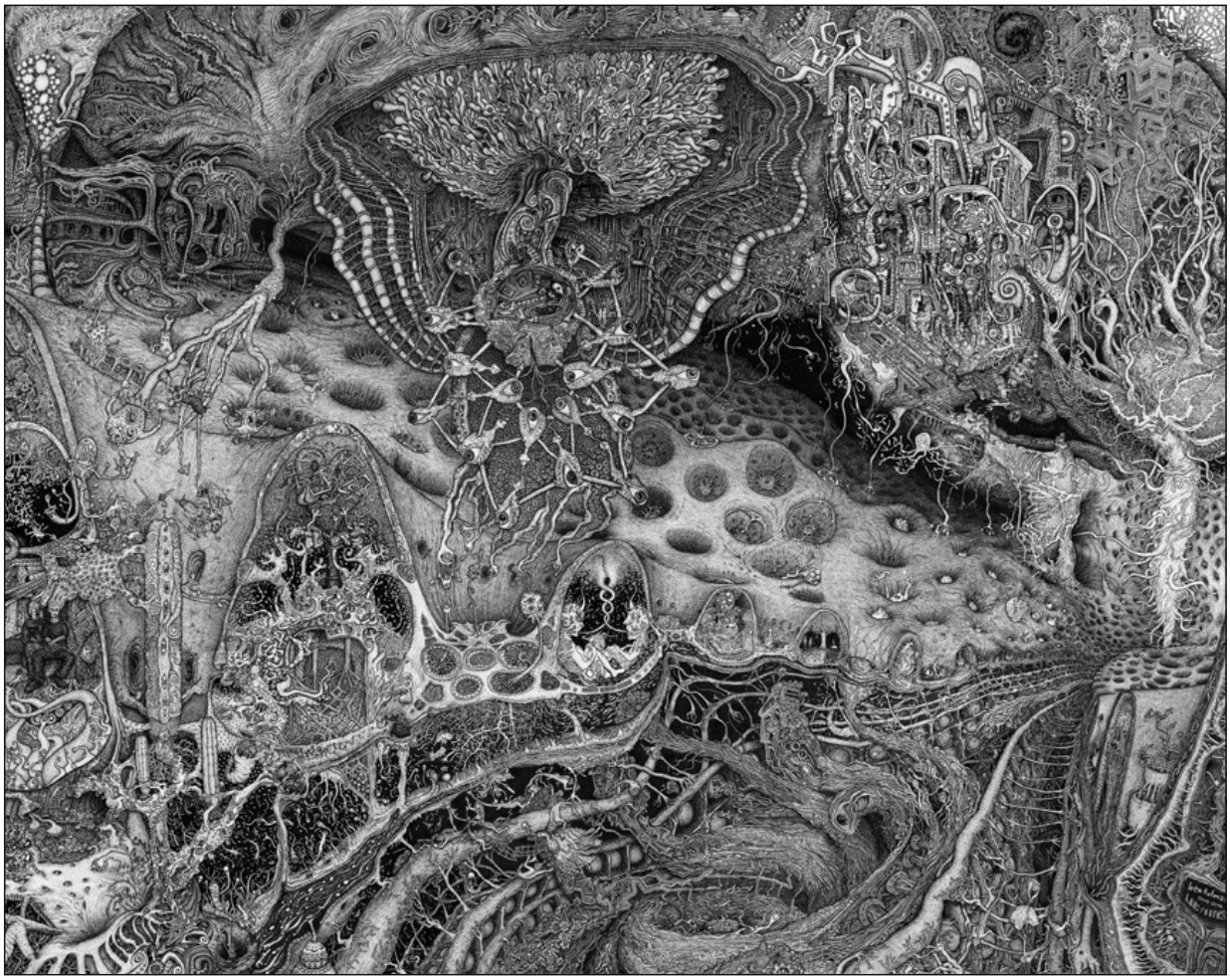
Making up a story can feel like a sort of intense method acting, playing not just a single role but several, learning worlds and ways beyond the common round. Visiting locations and interviewing people can provide marvelous content, but some of us will never have the resources for that level of immersion. Some of us will have lives that are relatively innocent of parenting, incarceration, magic, and six-legged scuttling no matter how much research we try to put in. Experts and novices alike will encounter a moment when they must make the leap of imagination and filter the facts they have, few or many, through their character's temperament, the demands of plot, and the story's setting. Whether mundane or magical, characters are icons of souls, plots are stylized sketches of the randomness of life, and settings are often dim imagination or dimmer memory. These thin representations somehow imbue what they represent with deeper meaning. That artist's trick, creating the illusion of three dimensions using only shades, lines, and angles on a flat canvas, also belongs to writers.

Fiction is the playground of your what-ifs, where questions get more mileage than certainties, and exploration is not only allowed but essential. By challenging yourself to write what you don't know, you become both student and teacher, employing research, thought experiments, observational studies, and sheer luck to craft a work that is layered, textured, and true. Sometimes it works just the way you want it to. Sometimes it escapes your conscious control. It is a mystery of content and process, and it is beautiful. ❧

RELEVANT WORKS

Holmes, Richard. *The Age of Wonder: How the Romantic Generation Discovered the Beauty and Terror of Science*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2009.

Shields, Carol. *Jane Austen*. New York: Viking, 2001.



"Novus Natura" by Ben Tolman (2006).

The Strangeness of the Imagination

Often exhilarating and a delight, the imagination is also deeply strange, perverse, disturbing, and, at times, frightening. Yet we shouldn't shy away from the darker parts of our creativity. If the beautiful things your imagination conjures up are valid and useful, so, too, is the ugly, inexplicable, untamed material.

When you commit to opening yourself up to your imagination, to the thoughts and ideas that come to you, and using them in your fiction, you are in a sense *surrendering* to the idea of inspiration—all of it, not just the fun parts. You may find yourself in the grip of powerful forces. Your conscious mind may even try to censor these ideas, but if you do, you run the risk of limiting your mind's capacity for the alien, the sinister, and the cruel.

The most direct result of my imagination manifesting in a disturbing way led to a story, "The Transformation of Martin Lake." A few years after going through a traumatic emotional period, a shadowy figure began to appear in my dreams. In these dreams, I would walk up to a house and extend my arm through a hole in the screen door. The figure would open the main door, hold my hand, palm up, and then plunge a knife into the middle of my palm. And keep cutting at it while I just stood there and let the figure do it. It's the most intense nightmare I've ever had—

with a clinical vividness to the violence—and after a while I couldn't take it anymore. I had to do something about it, so I wrote the scene into "The Transformation of Martin Lake," where it became one of the central images of the story. Once I worked the images into "Martin Lake," which went on to win the World Fantasy Award, I stopped having the nightmare.

Direct embedding of something from the subconscious into narrative is one thing. But most of the time, your subconscious provides just the prompt or the beginning and then expects the writer to fill out the implications. My novel *Annihilation* was inspired by a dream in which I was walking down the spiral staircase of a submerged tower, descending into the ground below. The darkness was lit by some unknown means. Soon, I noticed words written in English on the curling stone wall, at about the height where an adult human could have written them. But the words weren't written with ink or spray paint. They were written in living tissue of some kind. As I walked farther down, I realized that the words were slightly swaying, and that they were getting *fresher*. I understood with a shiver of dread that whatever or whoever was responsible for the words *was still down below me, and still writing*. I went deeper into the tunnel and eventually saw a light beckoning from beyond the next curve of the staircase. I was about to encounter the source of the writing . . . and that's when I woke up, jotted some notes, and ran to the computer.

In a sense, my subconscious mind was handing off the idea to my conscious mind—or you could say that my conscious mind had told my subconscious: "No, no—don't tell me anything more. I'll take it from here." And my subconscious was trusting that I **wouldn't balk from following up**, no matter how strange the context.

The novel's setting turned out to be a transformed version of a trail I've hiked for fifteen years. If my subconscious wanted to explore the irrational and bizarre, some part of me was also wise enough to surround the strange with something both real and personal.

But the point at which you experience this emotion can vary—an epiphany can be time delayed. In my 2009 novel, *Finch*, there is a revolutionary character given the moniker of the Lady in Blue. I first encountered the real lady in blue on a trip to England, back in 1996. She was busking in the Underground, with a CD for sale. I came upon her unexpectedly, and in the gloom of the corridor, on our way to catch a train, the sound of her singing was ethereal. I hesitated, meaning to stop to buy her CD, but we were in a rush, so I didn't, and my mind was left with questions: "What was the CD like, and was it as good as her singing? Was she a well-known singer just busking on a lark? What is her name?"

Four years later, getting onto a tram in Boston, something about the tram reminded me of the train in the Underground station, and that reminded me of the Lady in Blue, and suddenly my subconscious mind had delivered up to me a detailed history for her. I spent a good half hour on that tram writing down what had appeared spontaneously in my mind. Before I knew it, the Lady in Blue was a rebel leader in my fantastical city of Ambergris, and I knew everything about her childhood and her adult years. Would any of that have occurred if we had stopped and bought the London Lady in Blue's CD, and thus known her name and her background? I don't think so.

This time delay as your mind worries at the problem can also encompass more radical transformations. Remember the two encounters from my childhood I mentioned in the Introduction—the crown-of-thorns starfish in Fiji and the hummingbird hovering outside of my hotel window in Peru? I have never stopped thinking about

FACING PAGE
"There Lies the Strangling Fruit" by Ivica Stevanovic.


There is always a tension between wanting to see more and needing to pull back before you see too much.
Leave space for your imagination to lead you dark places...
Where lies the strangling fruit that came from the hand of the sinner I shall bring forth the seeds of the dead to share with the worms that...

how to make sense of these events, but along the way they have come together at least once, in a story entitled "Ghost Dancing with Manco Tupac." Late in the story, the Quichua guide leading an old conquistador-like character through the Andes has a vision. In the early-morning light, "the Conquistador's horse stepping gingerly among the ill-matched stones of the old Inca highway," the guide sees that "a flock of jet-black hummingbirds encircled the Conquistador's head like his Christian god's crown of thorns." As I wrote those words in the rough draft, it ignited the dual memories from my childhood as my subconscious provided one small, elegant answer by combining the two images.

From the book *York Minster* (1897, London), art by Alexander Ansted.

Distance from something has no bearing on the power of memory to transform and stimulate creativity. As writer Vandana Singh notes, "One story that I'm working on, for instance, picked up without warning a scene from my childhood, a vivid one, of walking home from the bus-stop after school, and seeing my little sister playing with a friend and a dog under a gulmohur tree in full flower. I didn't realize then what I know now, that the reason I've remembered that image all these years had something to do with my sudden awareness of the passing of time. And that's relevant to the story, but I had no warning it was going to be appropriated until a few seconds before I actually wrote that scene."

Sometimes, too, that rush of transformative inspiration can save a piece of fiction already in progress—like my far-future novel *Veniss Underground*, which was foundering. When my protagonist came to an underground organ bank to rescue his lover, I couldn't visualize the place. For some reason, without visualizing the organ bank, I couldn't visualize the rest of the novel, and I had to abandon it for several months. Then my wife and I visited the York Minster cathedral in England. As soon as we entered the church—a place older than Westminster in London—and I traced the path of the columns up to the stunningly high ceiling, the little hairs on my arms lifted, and I shivered. The columns, looking like multiple tubes tied together, were utterly alien to me. I'd seen nothing like them. My scalp was tingling. I could feel something rising up inside of me. The organ bank was becoming a reality right in front of my eyes.

But it wasn't until I walked around a corner and saw steps leading down to a door and a window set into the wall, wooden bars across it, that the back of my head exploded and I found myself hardly able to breathe. I could clearly see my main character walking around the corner as I had . . . and being confronted by a scene out of Dante's *Inferno* in that room with the little steps leading down to it. In my vision, that room stretched out and opened up into a much larger space filled with body parts in various stages of decay. As I saw this spreading out before me, so, too, the rest of the cathedral changed, until the columns became conduits for blood and the sculptures of saints on the columns were bodies set into the columns and the design on the ceiling of the cathedral was instead a series of floating cameras. I stood there scribbling away for long minutes, writing down what was being written into me. I couldn't keep up with the images and ideas cutting into my head. I had to find more paper. I had to keep writing. It was all spilling out. It was all becoming real.

York Minster transformed for the cover of the Polish edition of *Veniss Underground*; art by Tomasz Maronski (2009).

If you're lucky, you have five or six experiences like this during your career. I can't describe it as anything other than a phantasmagorical vision that overtook me. Anything I put down on paper could only be a shadow, an echo, a ghost of what I had experienced in the flesh. But, on a grand scale, it does remind you why you write: for those small and also profound moments of sudden knowledge that occur when you are *written.* In my case, that half hour in the York cathedral got me past the point of most resistance. A lot of hard work remained ahead of me, but I could see my way to the end.

What you produce during blind inspiration is not necessarily superior to what you produce during the slow slog. Everyone knows the deep disappointment of being unable to make the vision on the paper match the vision in one's head. But if you're not in love some of the time, how do you continue—especially if being in love some of the time leads to practical results? And, as the 1960s cult writer Cassandra Railsea once said, "Even expressing angst and frustration and despair in fiction are forms of pleasure seeking, because they speak to catharsis, or at the very least externalizing pain."

Writer's Block
by Matthew Cheney

Matthew Cheney's work has been published by English Journal, One Story, Web Conjunctions, Strange Horizons, Failbetter.com, Ideomancer, Pindeldyboz, Rain Taxi, Locus, The Internet Review of Science Fiction, *and* SF Site, *among others, and he is the former series editor for* Best American Fantasy. *He teaches English, Women's Studies, and Communications & Media Studies at Plymouth State University.*

Once upon a time, I thought writers' blocks were the wooden blocks with letters on them that I played with as a little kid. Though I later learned this was not what people meant by the term, I think it is useful still to think of writer's block that way. Imagine writer's block as a wall built with writers' blocks. It looks sturdy and impregnable if you've got your nose up against it, but it can be toppled over if you're willing to give it a push and then play around with the chaos. Here are some thoughts on writer's block with that in mind.

1. Writer's block can be as much a matter of perception as reality. Theodore Sturgeon complained frequently about writer's block, and yet he wrote, among other things, enough short stories to fill thirteen books. What might have happened if Sturgeon one day encountered *New Yorker* writer Joseph Mitchell at a café? Mitchell wrote a book, *Joe Gould's Secret*, that was itself about a man struck with writer's block, and then, from the book's publication in 1965 until his death in 1996, Mitchell showed up at his office at *The New Yorker* every day and didn't write a thing.

2. Or consider Tillie Olsen. A very fine short story writer, Olsen's major work is a slim book of four stories, *Tell Me a Riddle*. She also published a fragment of a novel she'd begun when she was nineteen, *Yonnondio*, and a book of nonfiction, *Silences*, about all the forces that cause writers—particularly writers who are female and/or poor—not to be able to write or publish. Olsen herself became as famous for not writing as for what she had written. She became a cherished symbol of the social inequalities that rob some writers of the time and money necessary for concentration. *Tell Me a Riddle* garnered extraordinary praise, and it would have been difficult for even the greatest of writers to live up to the expectations Olsen's readers built up for her over the years. (See also: Ralph Ellison and Harper Lee.) Her mythic power as a writer was strengthened by not writing.

3. Expectation can destroy artists of all kinds. It's a cousin to ambition, but ambition is a different thing (a distant cousin): the desire to be better than everybody else, the desire to match your skills against the best in history, the desire to make aesthetic objects of utter perfection—for all its perils (arrogance, ruined friendships and families, self-hatred), ambition can fuel writers toward great accomplishment. Expectations are more burdensome. Expectations put the wrong kind of voices in our heads. The voices of ambition say,

"Let's try to be great!" The voices of expectation say, "You must be great. Or else you are nothing."

4. In an essay on Theodore Sturgeon in *Starboard Wine*, Samuel R. Delany proposes that a defining difference between science fiction writers and more self-consciously "literary" writers is a difference in their attitudes toward revision. For various reasons, Delany maintains, it is not in the SF writer's best interests to appear to labor too hard over any particular piece of work, but for the writer who wants to attain literary (and academic) respectability, the exact opposite is true. While any writer trying to make a living off of their work would be better off being fast and prolific than not, there is more acceptance and encouragement of fast, prolific writing in the genrefied fields than in the marketplace of literary respectability. Joyce Carol Oates has published hundreds of short stories and more than fifty novels, a feat that is questioned in interviews and looked askance at in reviews, with nearly every reviewer who dislikes her work raising the question of whether she writes too much and too quickly. Such questions rarely arise for writers who are not perpetual candidates for the most prestigious literary awards; indeed, as George R. R. Martin can attest, many readers clamor not for a writer to be patient and careful, but rather to write faster.

5. Researching examples of writer's block, I wondered why most of the examples I found came from the more hallowed realms of the distinctly Literary. Certainly, writers of all types will acknowledge occasional struggles, especially with individual pieces of work, but my unscientific survey of interviews and biographies failed to find many genre writers of repute whose struggles with writer's block were as public as those of writers who have achieved some literary canonicity. Partly, this may result from genre writers being less biographied and interviewed (indeed, biographies and interviews in such venues as *The Paris Review* do much of the work of creating canonicity), but I suspect that Delany is right to see a difference between the types of perceptions that benefit genrefied and literaried writers. If we remove the commercial liabilities of writer's block for anyone who seeks to make money from their work, there remains the fact that, at least during the last one hundred years or so, it has been nearly impossible for genre writers to sustain a reputation with a small body of work, and nearly impossible for literary writers to avoid skepticism and contempt with a large body of work.

6. I rarely suffer writer's block because I don't have many expectations for my writing, and among those expectations I don't have is that most of my writing will be in one particular genre or another. I've written in every genre imaginable, even ones I have no talent for, such as journalism. (Journalists have to talk to people on the telephone. I don't like telephones. Neither did Thoreau. Also, journalists have to deal with fact-checkers, and I think fact-checkers are as annoying as telephones and careers.) Perhaps this is why I love Gertrude Stein's book *How to Write*, which is utterly different from all other writing guides—it is its own genre, and every genre, and none. Its oddness appeals to mine. It doesn't tell you how to write a best-selling novel in three months or how to get an agent or how to write poetry that rhymes. Instead, it contains paragraphs such as this: "There were three kinds of sentences are there. Do sentences follow the three. There are three kinds of sentences. Are there three kinds of sentences that follow the three." Also, my single favorite piece of writing advice: "Forget grammar and think about potatoes."

7. "What do you do about deadlines?" you say to me. I'm glad you asked that question, because I was just wondering it myself. For instance, I've been given a deadline for these words that I'm writing right now. That deadline is not pressing, but it's within a couple of weeks, and the next few weeks of my life are rather busy, so if I'm going to get this done, I'd better get it done now. But how can I write something about writer's block? Aside from the paradox of writing about not writing, there's also a big and practical problem: I don't

really have anything useful to say. It's not like I'm somebody you've heard of. Somebody you care about. And look at these sentences! Drivel. Anybody could write better sentences than these. They don't say anything. The words are simplistic and stupid. There are no ideas. I'm not communicating anything. If I ever manage to finish writing this, it will be rejected, so why do I even bother? It's just drivel. Pure drivel.

8. The greatest gift any writing instructor ever gave me was the lesson offered by the teacher of a course called Advanced Expository Writing at New York University. He required us to read *The Celestine Prophecy* because he ardently believed we needed to know what bad writing is. And he was right. It was inspiring. No matter how hard I try, I will never be able to write as badly as James Redfield. I will also never sell as many copies of a book as he did with that one. But nonetheless. This isn't about sales. This is about me worrying that I'm not Shakespeare or Joyce or Gertrude Stein or another writer of gobsmacking talent, such as Georg Büchner, who, by the time he died, had written two of the greatest plays of all time (*Danton's Death* and *Woyzeck*), a breathtakingly original work of fiction (*Lenz*), an amusing satirical comedy (*Leonce and Lena*), a radical political pamphlet ("The Hessian Courier"), and a pathbreaking scientific treatise on the nervous system of a common river fish. Büchner died at age twenty-three. He and I share a birthday. Whenever I am tempted to say to myself, "By the time he was my age, Büchner had been dead for fourteen years," I instead look at whatever I am writing and say to myself, "This isn't quite as bad as *The Celestine Prophecy*."

9. One of the most important expectations to give up as quickly as possible is the expectation of being original. You will not be original. The last person to be original was Gilgamesh. He didn't have a career or fact-checkers or a telephone, so he was far less burdened than anyone who came later. You should be grateful to him. It's a terrible burden, originality.

"People do manage to be original, though," you say to me. Maybe. But why put that burden on yourself? Do you think you'll ever get anything written if you keep holding yourself to a high standard of originality? Sure, it's possible. What do I know? I'm not omniscient. I don't even know who you are. Maybe you're Gilgamesh.

10. You can always write something. Literally. Something. Something. Something. Something. Something. Something. Gertrude Stein. Something. Something. Gertrude Something. Gertrude Gertrude. Stein Something. Something. Something. Goose.

11. But maybe there's nothing wrong with not writing. "So you're saying I should shut up?" you say to me. No, I'm sorry, that was rude. Writer's block feels horrible, I know, even if you're creating art. In my early twenties, after becoming disillusioned with the sort of writing I thought would make me rich and famous and loved, I stopped being able to write anything except bad poetry and shallow academic papers. For a year. I hid out in backwaters and tried to sweep up the shattered shards of my expectations, ambitions, desires, and dreams. It was one of the lowest periods of my life. I could sense that there were words somewhere in me, sentences that I needed to form, structures I needed to fill, but everything I actually wrote looked awkward, stilted, pretentious, incoherent, childish, stupid, weak, vapid. For a while, I didn't write anything, not even bad poetry or shallow academic papers, because to look at the vapid, weak, stupid, childish, incoherent, pretentious, stilted, awkward junk I'd written made me hate myself. I wanted to run around the corner and see the world blow up. I hated my inadequacies, my failure. Writing made it all so obvious, put it there on paper, let it stare at me in hateful, bitter ink. I couldn't bear it anymore. I stopped writing. I shut up. It's the closest I've yet come to feeling dead.

12. With time, I found words again. With time, I stopped hating all the words I found. With time, I

learned to stop expecting to write in one particular way, one genre or style or mode. I stopped caring about whether I created art or not-art. Some people can stick to one type of writing and be perfectly happy. I'm not one of them. Once I knew that, and once I stopped trying to pigeonhole myself for the sake of a career and originality and beating Georg Büchner, I didn't suffer any significant writer's block again. The lesson I take from that experience is that the way to beat writer's block is to get to know yourself better as a writer, and once you know yourself, accept yourself. You're not Shakespeare or Joyce or Gertrude Stein or Theodore Sturgeon or Joseph Mitchell or Tillie Olsen or Fran Lebowitz or James Redfield. For better or worse, you're you.

13. One of the most original of American writers, David Markson, wrote a series of novels composed of glimpses of ordinary, mortal life scattered in amid blocks of facts and quotes, most of them about writers and artists. One of those books is called *Reader's Block*. Some of its many short paragraphs include: "René Descartes was born in a hayfield," "Christina Rossetti almost certainly died a virgin," and "It remains a scandal to philosophy that there is as yet no satisfactory proof of an external world, Kant said." Early on in the book, we see this paragraph: "What is a novel in any case?" It's a guiding question for the rest of the book, a question that gives force to the form. It's a good question to ask about whatever genre you think you're writing in. ("What is this x in any case?") It may be that your assumptions about the genre (x = linear narrative), your expectations for it (x = well-rounded characters), are holding you back, blocking you. Maybe you need to mix up your equations and add more in any case. Why shouldn't you write a novel like a poem, a short story like an essay, a memo like a song? Why not try?

14. I have a folder on my computer named "Failed Attempts." I created it at least ten years and a few computers ago, expecting I could go back to a failed attempt sometime later and give it another shot, or at least grab some shreds and use them in something new. I've never done that, though, never resurrected a failed attempt. I might as well have thrown them all away. But I'm glad I didn't throw them away and instead filled that folder. It relieves any feeling of guilt I have for abandoning a piece of writing once it begins to feel like it's failing. I do so happily now. I drop it into the Failed Attempts folder and, liberated, start something else, something new, something different. I tell myself that we're taking a bit of a break from each other. I can always go back to it. I can always pull it out of the Failed Attempts folder if I need to. Failure doesn't have to be permanent. Think of the symmetric property of equality in algebra: X = Failed Attempt also means Failed Attempt = X.

15. "You didn't really answer my question about deadlines," you say to me. Didn't I? I'm sorry. I got distracted. Distraction, actually, is a key to overcoming writer's block. You need to misdirect yourself. You have a map in your head, and you think that's the direction you're traveling in, so you go down the road that the map tells you to go down, and in the middle of the road is an infinitely high wall that wasn't on the map. You can bang your feet and fists and head against the wall for eternity, but the wall is stronger than you. What you need to do is get rid of the map and get off the road. You need to get yourself lost, at least for a little while. (Go around a corner, watch a world blow up.)

16. Or, you could think about potatoes. ❧

The Strahov Theological Hall in Prague, Czech Republic (photo by Jorge Royan)

Some elements, then, that lead to inspiration and story, that shape and protect your imagination, are deeply allied with your subconscious. But you can train yourself to enter these built-in states by creating the conditions and environment optimal to conjuring up inspiration. Creating conditions and an environment in which it is *harder* to channel inspiration and creativity is one way to induce writer's block.

Sometimes, too, your conscious mind has to let your subconscious mind know the plan. In much of what I am documenting here, I am trying to give you permission to engage in a set of behaviors common to most writers. I want you to recognize that any or all of these impulses or *states of being* you exhibit are normal, that the very attributes that may make your friends or family at times find you strange or unengaged are part of the process. Our imaginations never really sleep if we protect and feed them properly, although they may need to hibernate from time to time.

If there is anything I hope you take away from this chapter, it would be the following:

- Beware of advice from people who say you have too much imagination. There is no such thing as too much imagination.
- Don't self-censor sudden flashes of inspiration because they strike your conscious mind as "stupid," "frivolous," "strange," or "unsettling." Even if you don't use the material, you are telling your subconscious that you want to believe that bears moved in next door.
- Remain open to possibilities for creative play with others, and understand that you are exercising the muscle of your imagination when you engage in creative play. You are also enabling others to do the same.
- Don't become impatient with the amount of time it takes for a story or novel

to come alive in your mind before you start writing. Thoughtfully considering what you write is an essential part of the process.
- Be open to including autobiographical elements in fantasy—it will often salvage what might otherwise be inert on the page.
- Be fiercely protective of your imagination, and nurture it.

Still, there are limits, and not all minds are built for the kind of creativity that fiction requires, in part because the point of the imagination at times is to fabricate, to in a sense *lie*, and by lying make the lie—that which does not exist—the truth.

Kali Wallace tells the story of having had a very smart friend in college, a neurology researcher who writes nonfiction, who claimed "with absolute certainty to have no imagination." Wallace recalls that "we had a great many conversations in which both of us would be utterly baffled and bemused by how the other person's brain works. She wanted to learn how to tease out imaginative thoughts from her brain, but I had absolutely no idea how to help her do that. Making things up comes so naturally to me I didn't even really understand how the world looked from her point of view."

☙ ☙ ☙

The imagination is infinite—it can encompass all you want it to encompass, if you let it. Everything we see around us, whether functional or decorative, once existed in someone's imagination. Every building, every fixture, every chair, every table, every vase, every road, every toaster. In fact, the world we live in is largely a manifestation of many individual and collective imaginations applied to the task of altering preexisting reality. So the question becomes, *How can you position yourself to dream well?*

Except in the most experimental instances, stories are about people—or at least feature human beings, aliens, or some organism that you can portray communicating, taking action, living a life. Whether you follow an insurance saleswoman or a king who owns a pet hippo, a talking penguin or an artificial intelligence, you will need to be able to make that person at least plausible, if not believable.

Chapter 5: Characterization

For many writers, all else comes out of characterization: plot, situation, structure, even the reader's perception of setting. However, the ways in which *writers* view characters and characterization can vary greatly. World Fantasy Award winner Jeffrey Ford says "I don't convey things through the characters, they convey things through me. I'm merely a conduit, but they're in charge." But Vladimir Nabokov famously scoffed at the widely repeated idea that characters "leap off the page," especially for the writer. His point? That to the writer this sensation of sudden life can occur with regard to any element of story, and is closely tied to inspiration—that all the components of fiction are equally unreal, words on a page, animated by the writer's imagination.

Brown University Literary Arts Program chair Brian Evenson, an O. Henry Award winner, agrees but also notes that "anything I can say about an actual living person to a friend in life is something I can also say, or that a narrator can say, in a story about a character. I may never have met my second cousin, but my father can tell me stories about him or do things to give me a sense of who he is, and how he thinks about the world. From that I can come to feel like I know him—if I feel that my father is a reliable judge of character and has enough knowledge of my second cousin to convey him. I can tell similar stories about a character and give the reader the similar illusion of 'knowing' someone they have never met," who has never existed except on the page.

Carrie Ann Baade's "Queen Bitch" (2008). What do you think you know about this person from the painting? What don't you know?

This question of the "life" of fictional characters often permeates the writer's own thoughts well after the story has been written. These are people who may be with you for a long time—whose lives may well continue to unspool in your mind long after you have finished writing fiction about them. Vandana Singh, author of the critically acclaimed collection *The Woman Who Thought She Was a Planet*, says that her characters talk to her sometimes, although "most shut up after I've finished the story. But some characters stay on in my head . . . . For a long time, I've been haunted by the character of one story. She's simply there as a presence, a rather comforting one, although I don't know why she's still there." The length of a character's half-life, then, is often not dependent on completion of a story or even what has been expressed on the page. It may even be that this secret storytelling also has a ghostly effect on the reader—that what is not told is still conveyed because of the numinous quality of the imagination.

But do these varying ideas of how writers perceive their characters affect the actual portrayal of character on the page? Not usually—these are just the ideal *constructs*, the ideal entry points, that individual writers create so that they can effectively channel the people they write about. In everything I present about characterization—the core of good fiction—remember that.

Types of Characterization

The extent to which the reader believes that your characters are real while reading, and how long those characters linger (or loiter) afterward, depends on many factors. But we are so used to thinking in terms of some form of three-dimensional, psychologically complete characterization that it's easy to lose sight of the fact that some stories require a different approach, and that this signals not some sort of *lack* but simply different *needs*.

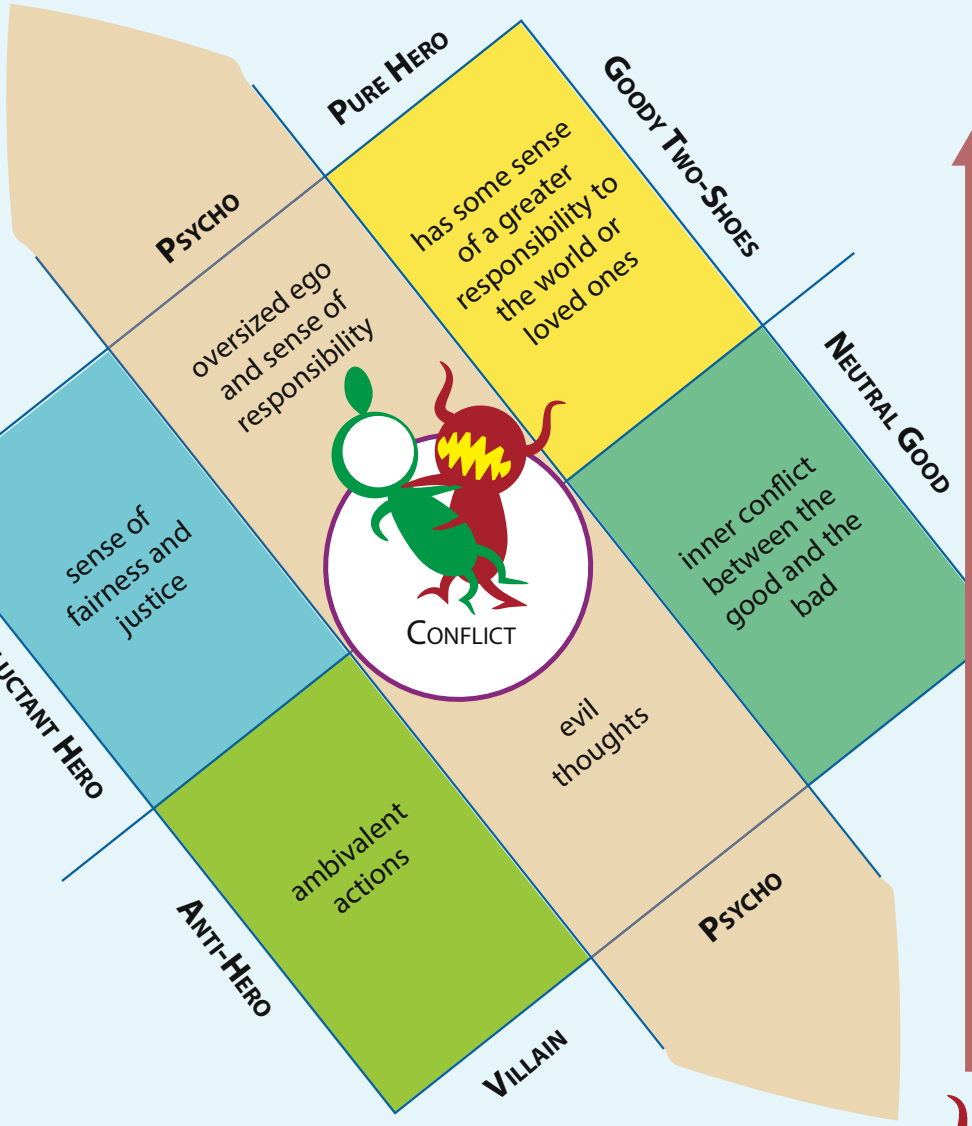
Most novels include examples of full, partial, and flat characterization because secondary characters cannot exist at the same level of detail as main characters.

There are at least **four main approaches** to characterization, with variations that fall somewhere along this spectrum. Few stories are populated by characters written in only one of these modes:

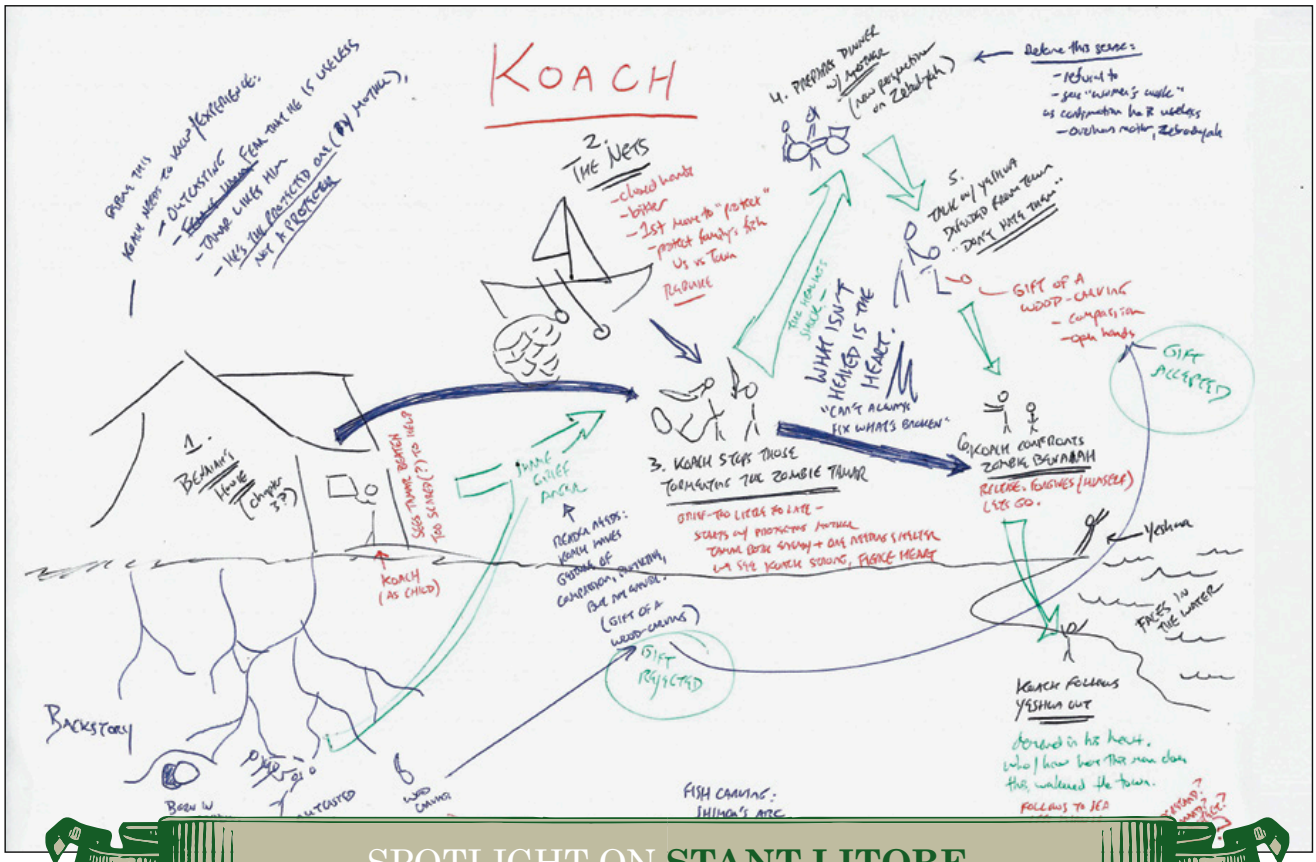
Obsessive Immersive. Perhaps the only mode truly wedded to a stylistic stance, the *obsessive-immersive* approach includes use of stream of consciousness to get so close to a character's interior that in some sense everything is contained within the character and nothing remains outside. This is not the closeness comparable to a handheld camera on the character's shoulder but the impossible experience of *living inside a*

Protag/Antag: The Sliding Scale

The protagonist is the hero or main sympathetic character in your fiction. Typically, this is the person with the most to lose or gain: someone that the reader finds interesting to follow. A protagonist can be a proactive instigator or acted upon by outside forces—or struggling with internal conflict.



The antagonist opposes the protagonist and, in the most clear-cut cases, may be considered "the villain" of your story. Typically, this is the person who stands in the way of the goals or well-being of the protagonist. Nature or society can also serve in this role. In stories about internal conflict, the antagonist and protagonist may be the same person.



SPOTLIGHT ON **STANT LITORE**

Stant Litore is the bestselling author of the Zombie Bible series, which takes situations and characters from the Bible and posits zombie infestations. The books are very much character-driven and are a unique addition to both historical and horror fiction. The image above shows one way that Litore works plot through character, by mapping the people in his stories, their interactions, and their placement in the landscape of the story. Here are his thoughts on characterization.

"The first thing I do is find out what makes my characters hurt and what makes them happy, find out what they're all doing in this story. I take a very pragmatic approach to backstory: I want to know what moment defined the character's relationship to their parents, what moment defined their greatest desire, and what moment defined their greatest fear. Those three moments are most of what I need, because those three tell me where the character comes from, what they want, and what holds them back. I write those three scenes. If there's a pivotal relationship in the story that has been going on for some time or that ended prior to the opening of the narrative, I write the couple of scenes that really matter to that relationship: its beginning, its highest point, its first moment of real risk, and where it ended (if applicable).

"Godlike, you as the writer get to set the rules—here are events that have happened in your character's life, here are some obstacles, here is something your character fears, something she desires—but once you have set those parameters, the character executes the story within them, surprising the writer. It's like writing a complex software program, or creating a virtual reality environment, and then running it and seeing what happens. You are creating everything that occurs, yet you are surprised.

"A character can be sympathetic and psychologically nuanced and yet also quite forgettable. Readers need characters they can admire. Even a character—say, a villain—that we dislike, we need to find admirable in some respect. We need to see their moments of strength in meeting some obstacle. Whether we are reading of a soldier carrying his fallen comrade across a field in the midst of battle, or a single mother saying no to her boss so that she can spend the evening with her daughters, or an addict finally picking up the phone and pausing, wrestling with himself before dialing the number to get help—what we are drawn to is that moment of strength, of willpower. The characters we never forget are the characters we admire."

brain or brains. James Joyce's *Ulysses* is an obvious example, but so, too, in a different mode, is Alexander Theroux's *Darconville's Cat*, a sometimes Boschian exploration of misanthropy and misogyny that is simultaneously a phantasmagorical drunken ramble of Golgothian proportions. Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* also falls into this category by sacrificing natural character context in favor of integrity of character; thus, explanations often occur where they would naturally for *people* but not for *narrative.* Such works may lurk and lurch and create their annihilating effects through the sheer inability to recognize that what they want to achieve is impossible. Practitioners tend to be both the most celebrated and most obscure members of our pantheon of writers.

Full (sometimes called Rounded). *Full* characterization dips into the interiority of the characters, and it often gives the reader a character's thoughts, feelings, personal history, and relationships in a way that conveys a "three-dimensional" sense of a person. But unlike obsessive immersive, full does not seek to erase the world beyond the character. The thoughts of the character do not define everything. Practitioners often fall into the vague category of the "literary mainstream" or "literary fantasy," so defined in part because of this approach to characterization. Margaret Atwood, Philip Roth, Elizabeth Hand, and Toni Morrison are examples of writers who (usually) engage in full characterization.

Partial. Most fiction of any kind—genre or nongenre—uses an approach to characterization that is neither flat nor full but instead *partial*. Character histories, relationships, and opinions may be quite extensive, but true interiority is often more limited than in full, even if we can sympathize or identify with the person as a reader. There are at least two varieties of partial:

- ***Idiosyncratic.*** The great story writer Kelly Link tends to use partial characterization in many of her stories. The characters aren't flat, as in folktales, but neither do we get a full sense of them; they remain mysterious to some extent yet somehow seem unique.

- ***Type driven.*** In some kinds of stories featuring partial characterization, unique individuality may be absent and instead *types* are evoked—the plucky airline stewardess, the gruff police detective—to flesh out characterization. As a result, readers may even project onto characters attributes that may not be there because they are adding built-in assumptions about the attributes of certain types. The character will most definitely exert power and influence. However, the writer has more freedom to manipulate the character along a path because fewer character details and thoughts have been given to the reader that would make the reader feel that *this specific person* would not take this action. Usually, type-driven characterization favors external plot over what might be called character-driven narrative. In the best examples, these types transcend their origin, and art is created by the tension between the constraint of the type and the writer's talent.

Flat. Nonrealistic fiction sometimes uses a form of characterization known as flat (as

I personally love defining a character for a reader by the choice of a very few highly specific and unique details: "She kept a mealyworm for a pet until she turned six and her parents took her to England for the summer." — **Kij Johnson**

Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* veers between aspects of full and partial characterization in its feminist retellings of folktales. In a sense, to reclaim these tales for women, Carter had to expand the uses of characterization to show the women in these tales as fully human.

opposed to full or rounded). Folktales and fairy tales, along with their modern variants, rarely feature rounded characters. **Folktales** are by design highly efficient storytelling engines, packed full of plot. Fleshing out characters would actually be detrimental to the effect of the tale being told (although some writers have played against type by creating fairy tales with partial or full characters). Fairy tales also often deal with archetypes by default and thus exist on a clear symbolic as well as literal level; they are conveying some kind of message or moral or use the vehicle of characters mostly to express some theme or idea. Satirical fiction also comes at characterization from a different stance: that of exaggeration and grotesquery. Take, for example, *Gulliver's Travels* by Jonathan Swift.

All of these approaches are valid, depending on context, and each can achieve interesting artistic effects. Can we really say that obsessive immersive is superior to full or partial, when it is used so rarely? Can we say *full* necessarily works better than *partial* in a hard science fiction novel about an attack on the United States with a new biological weapon? Would partial characterization have been of use to Toni Morrison in writing *Beloved*?

It also helps to understand that the boundaries between these approaches are porous, with variations and cross-pollination that make a mockery of categories. For example, Brian Evenson's brilliant novella *The Brotherhood of Mutilation* provides only brief hints of the main character's thoughts and hardly any character history; it relies almost entirely on the present moment and dialogue to convey character. Yet, we identify with this character due to his perilous situation and gain a deep understanding of him due to the decisions he must make as a result.

WEB

Tainaron EXCERPT

Iconic Finnish writer Leena Krohn's nameless narrator in the extraordinary *Tainaron: Mail from Another City* only hints at a past life while chronicling encounters with the titular city's giant talking insects. What we know about Krohn's main character

J. J. Grandville illustration from *Gulliver's Travels* (1856).

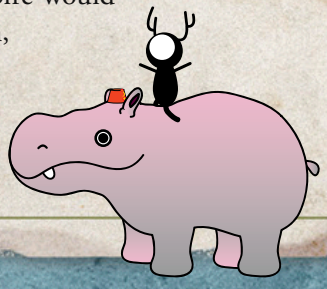
OPPOSITE "King and His Hippo" illustrations by Ivica Stevanovic.

The King and His Hippo: Full vs Flat

Although not true in every case, stories featuring flat characterization tend to behave like some ravenous beast feeding a monstrous and insatiable tale-producing stomach. Those details and character interactions that might be drawn out and examined are instead used as fuel for moving on to the next part of the story. By contrast, stories featuring full characterization exist in a space in which the writer clearly feels that deeper exploration of character yields story, too—just in a different way. Take, for example, the case of "The King and His Hippo" . . .

FULL: King Mormeck inherited the hippo from his father, Leppo, when he ascended the throne. Before Leppo's death, Mormeck had been raised by nannies, his mother passing in childbirth. He had seen the old man perhaps five times a year. Mormeck's first memory of Leppo was at court, during a formal event and he had perhaps spent an hour with his father in private during his lifetime. Yet everyone knew that Leppo had long conversations with the hippo, which he had named Leppo the Younger. Mormeck envied the hippo, and hated that he envied the hippo. So when King Mormeck visited the water gardens and first locked eyes with the incredibly ugly beast, he felt many conflicting emotions, chief among them sadness. "What could he have talked to you about, Scourge?" he asked. But Leppo the Younger kept his own counsel.

FLAT: Upon the death of King Leppo, his son Prince Mormeck inherited not just the throne but the royal hippo, which had been quite dear to the old king. But King Mormeck despised the creature and ignored those who said the animal had brought good luck to the kingdom. Soon he forgot the hippo as the empire to the east threatened his borders. At the head of his troops, King Mormeck fought many a skirmish with the Emperor's troops and proved himself worthy of his station. Yet the Infamous Sneed, the court advisor for many years, often spoke in his ear that eventually the Empire would crush their tiny kingdom, that instead they must propose a marriage to the Emperor's daughter.



could be conveyed inside a handful of fortune cookies. However, the observations this person makes about the city's inhabitants—and the things not said—result in a kind of deep characterization. And those things we do know about the character take on added weight because they are our only clues. By the end of *Tainaron*, we feel we know this anonymous, faceless character whose past is mostly opaque to us, and we may also feel that through this character's perspective we have grappled with life's great mysteries.

The answer is that sometimes you can't, except by studying every aspect of a particular work of fiction.

What category does Evenson and Krohn's approach fall under? What stance do their narratives take? How do we **pin this fictional butterfly** to the killing board? A diagnosis of full, partial, or flat characterization seems somehow inadequate applied to either work.

Another reason to be eclectic in one's approach to character, and generous in thinking about what constitutes good characterization beyond any ridiculously binary idea of full versus flat, is the fact that literary traditions outside of the United States and United Kingdom can employ vastly different approaches. For example, how would you classify Nigerian writer Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, one of the finest works of the imagination ever written? In the novel, the narrator encounters forty thousand dead babies that try to beat up him and his wife, before a monster comes along and puts all of them in a bag. After escaping from the monster and also the Deads of dead-town, he encounters a hungry creature that wants to eat them both—and eventually does.

Jeremy Zerfoss's artistic rendering of Amos Tutuola (2012).

"I said that, rather than leave my wife with him, I would die with him, so I began to fight him, but as he was not a human-being, he swallowed me too and he was still crying "hungry" and going away with us. As I was in his stomach, I commanded my juju which changed the wooden-doll back to my wife, gun, egg, cutlass and loads at once. Then I loaded the gun and fired into his stomach, but he walked for a few yards before he fell down, and I loaded the gun for the second time and shot him again. After that I began to cut his stomach with the cutlass, then we got out from his stomach with our loads, etc. That was how we were freed from the hungry-creature, but I could not describe him fully here, because it was about 4 o'clock A.M. and that time was very dark too. So we left him safely and thanked God for that."

WEB

TUTUOLA EXCERPT

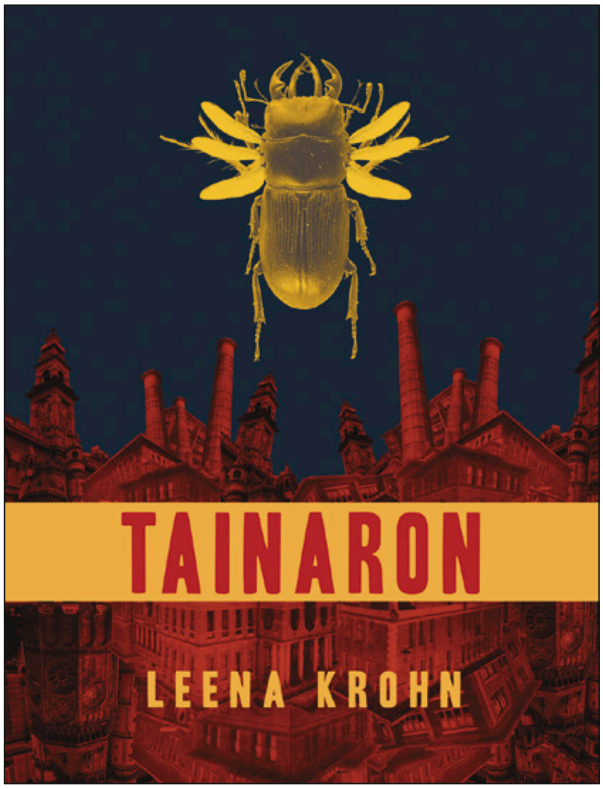
Tutuola's imagination often merged with his Yoruba heritage—at the sentence level he is sometimes "translating" Yoruba expressions into English and employing storytelling techniques that come from Yoruba oral traditions. He also created an amazing

forward-propelling story engine for characters: one that rescues them from one outrageous situation only to embroil them in an even more outrageous scenario. To stop and reflect, to flesh out character in a normal way, would make no sense at all. Can you imagine how different (and terribly bad) *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* would be rendered if more prosaic three-dimensional characterization had been used? And yet Tutuola's best works are not really folktales, either. They are a hybrid that exists in the spaces between types of story and types of characterization.

Whom Should You Write About?

Characterization, like all else about writing fiction, is a process of exploration and discovery. But there are some basic questions you need to ask to determine if you have chosen the right approach. Asking these sorts of questions is important, whether your character is a clerk in a bookstore in London or a Jell-O–based alien on the planet Blobbo-16 in the Blobbovine galaxy:

- Is the viewpoint character the one with the most to gain or lose?
- Is this the character with the most agency in the narrative, and does agency drive your view of character more than the idea of external constraints on the character?
- Is this the character who most interests you or that you are most passionate about?
- What limitations will you have as a result of using this character?
- If you are using first person, does this character have an interesting way of expressing things?
- Do you want the reader to feel close to this character or more distant?



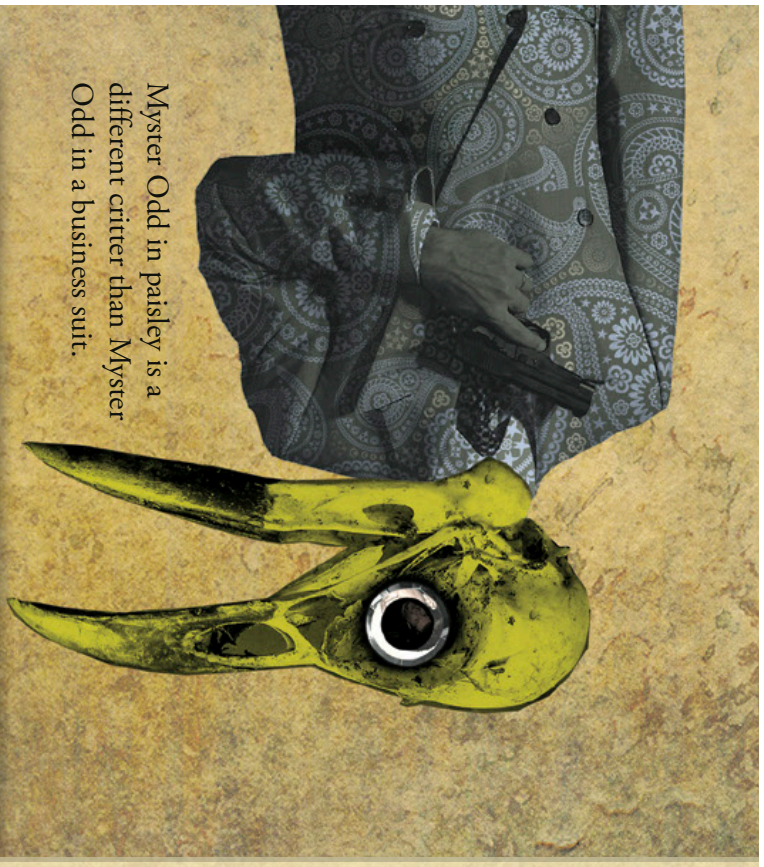
Cheeky Frawg cover for *Tainaron* (2012). It could be said that the narrator of this novel is merely an observer, and does not have as much to gain or lose as those observed.

Two other basic questions to ask are:

- What does this person need?
- What does this person want?

What a character wants is often far different than what he or she needs. As bestselling author Tobias S. Buckell notes, "Differences between what the characters need and what they want create tension if the character does something to achieve what they want, even if it's not what they need." In extreme situations, the disconnect between what a character wants and what they need is so great that the behavior becomes

Giuseppe Arcimboldo's "The Librarian" shows a man made of books. What would such a character look like on the page? How would defining a character by the books they read influence the reader's perception of a story?

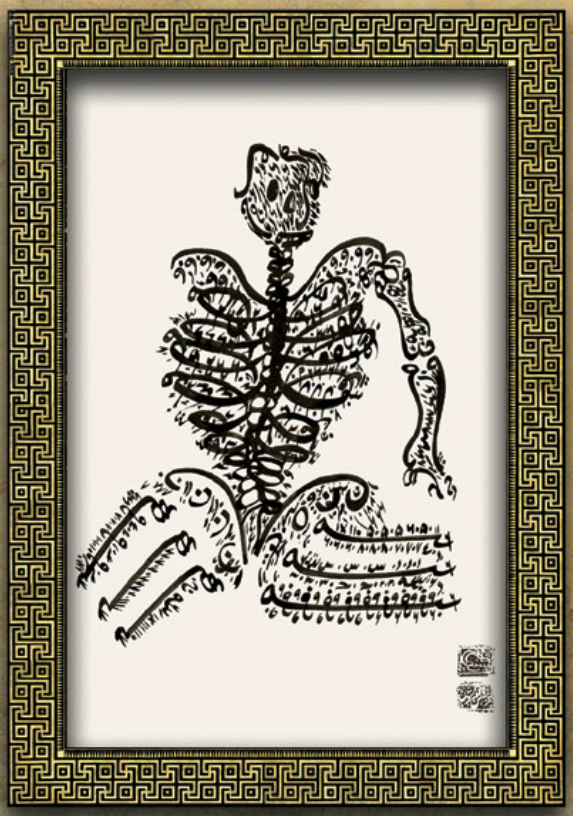


Myster Odd in paisley is a different critter than Myster Odd in a business suit.

Photographing Aleister Crowley, the infamous mystic and occultist, in ceremonial garb reinforces the iconic idea of him as a fringe figure imbued with strange powers. In creating your characters, do you support or undermine their self-made myths?

MYSTER ODD'S CHARACTER CLUB

Every approach to portraying people creates a different impression in the reader's mind.



Kristen Alvanson's "Maskh No. 7 (Deathless Spell)" is a skeleton "outlined by movements that shape Arabic and Farsi alphabets and numbers." Close up, the image is revealed as "intricate compositions" of miniature ciphers and alpha-numeric elements. How does this approach compare or contrast with that of Arcimboldo? Is a character depiction of this kind as accurate as a realistic physical description? What is gained or lost?

The title of Carrie Ann Baade's "Explaining Death to a Rabbit" offers intriguing entry points to characterization. The artist writes: "When I was a child, I imagined myself as a rabbit. I collected rabbits and had an eerie obsession with Easter. When I was four, my parents took me to see Watership Down. In the film, the rabbits fight to the death. As you can imagine, this was a traumatic experience."

Henry Söderlund's photograph of Ninni Aalto, a Finnish artist, poses the question "What is staged and what is real?" What is the relationship between the observed and the observer? Is the pufferfish a grace note of humor or something personal to Aalto?

Conflict can arise from the discrepancy between the way the character perceives herself and how she is perceived by the people around her. Perhaps her success causes hardship for others, which they seek to redress. — **Nathan Ballingrud**

destructive. How far will this person go to get what they want—and how long will they ignore what they need? Too wide of a gap creates crisis, conflict, and thus story.

Explorations of need versus want may well be internal rather than external, or feature an antagonist that isn't another person. "In my own stories, I sometimes feel like the main character is often their own worst enemy," writer Christopher Barzak, author of *One for Sorrow*, points out. "As opposed to having an antagonist outside of themselves in the world. Or the conflict arises from a character whose culture is opposed to their own happiness and freedom; for example, a gay character in a world built for heterosexuals."

Traditionally, too, beginning writers are advised to pick the character with the largest stake in the story and potentially the most ability to take action. As a result, agency has been perhaps overemphasized, even if it remains of real importance in how readers identify or do not identify with characters.

"A peripheral narrator, who mainly serves as a conduit for the reader, can be an effective character," Barzak believes. "So often they're seen as passive, but I think they have a place. In *The Great Gatsby* the resolution happens both outside of the narrator, in the story he's watching play out, as well as within as he makes a final judgment about what he's just watched happen."

Whether your narrator's position in the story makes that person passive or not, the idea of constraint—that, just as in the real world, characters face obstacles and are limited in their ability to act by society, culture, and other factors—also has been used in interesting ways.

To consider whether traditional ideas about agency and constraint make sense for your fiction, ask yourself a few questions:

- ***How does the weight of everyday existence affect your character?*** Is it a light, almost imperceptible weight that doesn't constrain the character? Or is it a heavier weight that impinges on the character's ability to live, perhaps even to perform basic functions? If you're living in a house in a high-crime area with shootings nearby on a monthly basis, and you have to take the bus to work because you can't afford a car, your environment is pushing back against your hopes and dreams in a very particular way.
- ***In what ways does your character create an operational reality that is more or less in line with what one might call "the official story"?*** For example, how does it affect point of view and action if a character buys into either one of these two ideas, or into both?
  - » The United States guarantees more freedoms for its citizens than any other country in the world, and we must defend those freedoms.
  - » All policemen are corrupt, and going to the police should always be a last resort.

Clearly, there are real, concrete elements or facts—dangers and opportunities—that influence a person's operational reality, and this affects their lives. But there is also interpretation of the world, the subjective ways in which a person chooses to analyze, interpret, and internalize, that makes them unique as a character and defines their interaction with their environment.

"Babylon City" (2010) by Ivica Stevanovic's representation of human beings and setting; how heavily does environment affect the character?

These issues speak to how environment and perception affect the idea of character agency. Just how much influence does a particular person have within the setting? Agency in fiction has to exist in context to the worldview. Otherwise, agency is not just meaningless or unconvincing, it is often laughable. Unfortunately, agency is often thoughtlessly given to characters who would not have it in reality. Unadulterated, unexamined agency is boring. It can also be potentially deadly in the context of fantastical fiction: Because everything is potentially possible, finding ways to introduce constraint is often an important principle.

Agency is also not a monolithic construct—a character can have lesser or greater agency across a range of possible scenarios. *The high-powered corporate lawyer who, in the context of a family get-together, has no influence due to the presence of a powerful matriarch. The garbageman who is the leader of a community action committee.* Moving past simplistic ideas about character agency is fairly important to creating complex effects.

WEB

OPERATIONAL REALITIES

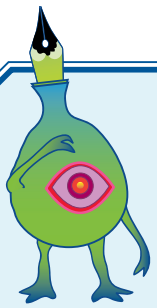
Getting to Know Your Character

Beyond the answers to these general questions, you will probably also need to know more specific things about your character, which I've set out in **categories below**. Knowing even some of the answers to the questions posed above will help you understand not just how your character will act or react in certain situations, but help you to make the character more real on the page, regardless of whether you write full or flat characters:

These basic points were fleshed out from a lecture by Canadian writer Karin Lowachee.

Two people stare out of two different windows in two cities in India. How similar are these two people, really? How different are they? What can you tell about them from these photos, and what is hidden from you? (Photographs by Jorge Royan.)

- ***Physical appearance.*** Extended descriptions of characters have gone out of fashion with many readers, and these details do leave less room for the reader to help create the character in their imagination. But this still remains a potent way to anchor a character, if used well. A description of hairstyle, clothes, and other details also helps to ground a character in a particular time period, society, or social class. You may also experiment with providing no physical descriptions. In my latest novel, I use this technique to force emphasis onto actions and dialogue.
- ***Quirks of behavior or thought.*** These can be anything from nervous tics or mannerisms to repetition of speech or obsessive thought loops or thought expressed in some other way unique to the individual. Fair warning, though: The average person wastes three years of their life reading generic character mannerisms. Too often writers use "she sighed and crossed her arms" or "he cracked his knuckles" just as placeholders in narrative—a sop to the idea that there must be some description of what the character is doing during a scene. Make sure you know your characters well enough to depict their own specific reactions and mannerisms. (Although *any* herky-jerky collection of tics, smirks, and fidgets, unique or not, can be distracting; sometimes nothing at all is just fine.)
- ***Habits.*** What a character does on a regular basis helps to define their routine, sometimes at a very specific level. Do they come home every night and make a martini? Or does the character stop at a bar and order a martini there? Making one is a very different habit from going to a bar. Do they always park on the left side of the garage even though there's no car on the right? Do they wake up every morning and put on armor and go fight dragons or go outside and putter around the garden? Even from just the most mundane aspects of daily life, the reader can begin to get a sense of what makes the character happy or satisfied, what helps them relax, or even reveal something deeper. Perhaps there used to be a car parked on the right side of the garage. Perhaps that person is gone now, for any number of reasons.



WRITING CHALLENGE

This image from Shadows *by Charles Henry Bennett (London, 1850s) suggests both the hidden characteristics of a person and, perhaps, a technique: using the attributes of an animal to help in describing your character. Write a paragraph describing someone you know well using only attributes of one particular animal.*

- ***Beliefs.*** How political is your character? How religious? Are they idealistic about government, or are they cynical? How do they express their beliefs? Are they likely to argue a point of politics or religion with a friend, or are they less confrontational about it? How do their beliefs inform their daily lives? Is there a difference between their beliefs and their actions?
- ***Hopes or Dreams.*** What a character sees in their future is also important, because it denotes a life beyond the here and now, and it begins to describe what the character wants. Does the character have practical goals, or pipe dreams? Do their hopes revolve around individual aspirations or those of their family?
- ***Talents and Abilities.*** What a character is able to do and what they excel at provide fertile ground for storytelling and characterization. Is what the character devotes most of their time to in line with their talents? Do the character's hopes and dreams revolve around something for which they have no talent? Are they talented at something they really don't want to do?
- ***Insecurities.*** We expect characters to be strong on the page, to some degree, but it's their vulnerabilities, their hidden weaknesses, that help to define the limits of their strength and to let the reader know the difficulties in the struggle to be strong. In what areas does the character feel most insecure? How do these insecurities match up with the reality?
- ***Secrets and Lies.*** What a character keeps hidden reveals a lot about their character. Ask yourself what secrets your character keeps from other people, and why. Many a story has had such a secret at its heart. You should also ask what lies your characters tell, and why. These lies may or may not be related to secrets. Sometimes a person will lie simply to try to make the world consistent with their own view of themselves and their place in it.

What you find out about your character should be placed within a larger context: the continuum of how your character acts in terms of job, relationships, place in society, and other environmental factors. You probably won't use everything you know

It's also useful to remember to love the evil in your heroes. The impulses towards fear, anger, and jealousy are universal, and make a hero three-dimensional and human. — **Nathan Ballingrud**

about a character in your story. You may even decide not to explore your characters in this way unless you are having trouble seeing them clearly. But as Tiptree Award winner Johanna Sinisalo notes, there are good reasons to sketch out your characters at least a little beyond what the reader finds out about them: "I like to know what they eat, how they decorate their homes, their upbringing and childhood, and even what kinds of music they like to listen to, even if I never use this data. This gives me tools to motivate the characters and understand their reactions."

Mistakes to Avoid

In my experience, beginning and intermediate writers make some basic mistakes with regard to characterization. These mistakes often pertain to losing perspective because of focusing so hard on the main character and perhaps becoming too "embedded" with the main character and thus too close to your story.

- ***Accidentally writing about a sociopath or psychopath.*** Because the nature of obsession leads to extremes and because an obsessed character is dramatically interesting, some writers don't realize until too late that they have inadvertently written about a sociopath. I say "inadvertently" because it becomes clear from the context of the story that the writer sees the main character's actions as heroic, even when, if analyzed dispassionately, they are actually the actions of a disturbed individual. Once, a story came to me and my wife about a man who wanted to travel to the moon and spent his entire life focused on that goal to the exclusion of all else. From the writer's comments, it was clear he didn't see the results of his protagonist's actions and single focus. A conclusion written as unabashed sentimental triumph was actually about a monster trampling decent people to achieve his goal.
- ***Forgetting to love the evil.*** Villains are often the heroes of their own stories, and if you write from their perspective, you should not expect these characters to recognize their actions as evil or morally dubious. Nor should you as the writer editorialize about such a character in most cases. To do so is to destabilize the story you are telling—to be false to viewpoint. This advice does not apply to depictions of certain types of sadists or morally ambiguous, tortured characters who perform evil acts even though they know what they do is wrong.
- ***Being too quick to kill—or to revive.*** The death of a character should have weight to it. If a story includes the death of a character or characters, the act should be integral to the plot and interaction with other characters. This applies doubly to murder. Conversely, in some fantasy stories writers are too quick to resurrect dead characters through uncanny means. Readers tend to become impatient with any writer who seems cavalier about bestowing either life or death.
- ***Ignoring your secondary characters.*** Just as your antagonist is a hero in their own mind, so, too, are your secondary characters, who, as in real life, have their

Writing The Other by Lauren Beukes

Lauren Beukes is an award-winning novelist who also writes comics, screenplays, TV shows, and occasionally journalism. Her novel Zoo City *(2010), which the* New York Times *described as "an energetic phantasmagorical noir," won the Arthur C. Clarke Award and the Kitschies Red Tentacle. She is also the author of* Moxyland*, a dystopian consumertopia thriller and a nonfiction book,* Maverick: Extraordinary Women From South Africa's Past. *Her current novel,* The Shining Girls*, is about a time-traveling serial killer.*

Writing The Other is a sensitive topic. It should be. Not least because it's so often been done so very, very badly.

But the truth is that unless you're writing an autobiography, any character you write is going to be The Other.

I am not a serial killer. (Unless my multiple personalities are hiding something from me.) I am also not a '50s housewife, a parking attendant, a car-jacking reality-TV star, a Ugandan e-mail scammer, a Tokyo mecha pilot, or a future-world stubborn-as-heck gay anticorporate activist. And even though my novelist friends Thando Mgqolozana and Zukiswa Wanner like to joke that I'm a black girl trapped in a white girl's skin, I'm not *Zoo City*'s hip, fast-talking, ex-journo, ex-junkie black Joburg girl protagonist, Zinzi.

I don't have a lot of patience for authors who say they'd be too scared to write a character outside their cultural experience. Because we do that all the time. It's called using your imagination.

The other people I don't have a lot of patience for are the ones too lazy to do any research. I heard a radio interview recently with a poet who had written a whole book of verse about the sex workers in Amsterdam's red light district and the incredible empathy she had for these women and how she tried to climb inside their heads to really expose the painful reality of their experiences.

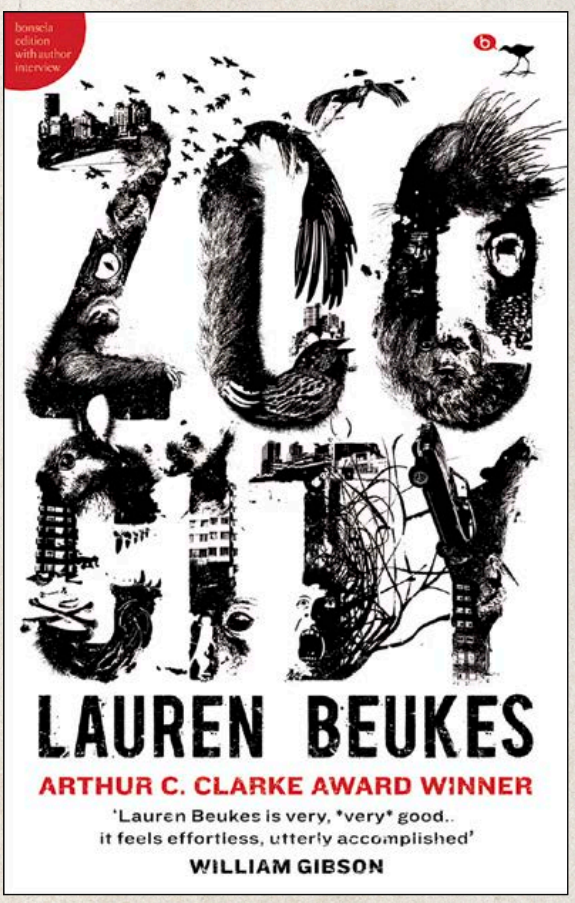
Number of sex workers she interviewed or even tried to engage in a casual chat to get that in-depth insight into the painful reality of their experiences?

Zero.

Sometimes imagination isn't enough on its own. People are people. We love. We hate. We bleed. We itch. We succumb to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, and traffic makes us pissy. But culture and race and sexuality and even language are all lenses that shape our experiences of the world and who we are in it.

The only way to climb into that experience is to research it, through books or blogs or documentaries or journalism or, most important and obvious, through *talking to people*.

I was lucky to have good friends like Lindiwe Nkutha, Nechama Brodie, Verashni Pillay, and Zukiswa Wanner, who were all willing to take me around Johannesburg AND read the manuscript afterward to make sure that I got the cultural details of the people—and the city—right.



I read books about Hillbrow, like Kgebetli Moele's *Room 207*, watched documentaries and movies, and turned to Twitter to get expert firsthand info on city details like storm-drain entrances and good places to dump a body (!).

I chatted with music producers and journalists to understand the South African music industry and interviewed refugees like Jamala Safari to get insight into what he'd been through (and referred him to my publisher when he mentioned he'd written a novel about his journey from the Democratic Republic of Congo to Cape Town).

I visited the Central Methodist Church, where 4,000 refugees were sheltering in the worst conditions that were the best possible option for them in that moment; got bounced from the Rand Club; paid for a consultation with a *sangoma* (who diagnosed a dark shadow over my life and recommended I sacrifice a black chicken); and interviewed other traditional healers to make sure I was on track about the details before I twisted them to my fictional purposes. And I spent a week just walking around Hillbrow and talking to people.

As my official "culture editor," Zukiswa Wanner busted me a couple of times on inaccuracies—almost all of them about inner-city-living details, like Zinzi stopping to buy a single Stuyvesant cigarette from a street vendor. "No ways, dude, I'm sorry, it would be a Remington Gold. That's the cheap generic," or providing the correct slang for the ubiquitous plastic woven rattan suitcases used by refugees: *amashangaan*.

"But is Zinzi black enough?" I asked her, after going through all the notes in Zukiswa's commissioned reader's report, which hadn't addressed the point even once.

She laughed at me. It hadn't occurred to her.

"Oh Zinz is hip and black enough," she said. "Fuck anyone who questions that. What does that even mean? Don't worry about it. I, too, am going to be catching flak. I write purely from the male perspective in *Men of the South*, so you'll have company."

No one (yet) has given me flak for being a white South African writing a black South African. And Zukiswa's *Men of the South* was just short-listed for the Herman Charles Bosman prize. She says she only gets flak from people who assume she's a man and that Zukiswa is a pseudonym.

In the end, I think my question should never have been "Is Zinzi black enough?" It should have been "Is she Zinzi enough?" Because it's not about creating one-trick ponies that reflect some quintessential property of what we think being Other is about. It's about creating complex, deep, rich characters driven by their own motivations and shaped by their experiences.

People are different. There are things we don't get about each other. Usually it's because we haven't asked.

So ask.

And then write.

Are these rogues or heroes, or rogue-heroes? Only the artist Jeremy Zerfoss really knows.

own goals, emotions, allegiances, and friends. When and where possible, you also should apply some version of the fact-finding set out in this chapter to your secondary characters. The more you know about them, the more they become part of the story, and may well wield influence over your main character in ways you didn't realize—or just react differently than you had expected before you knew them better. For example, in a story by Tamas Dobozy, the main character acquires a visa from a clerk, but when he gets to the border he finds that the clerk vindictively put a piece of blank paper in the envelope. Sometimes if secondary characters make things harder for the main character, you create interesting opportunities for drama or plot.

- ***"Thick" deployment of character backstory.*** As with historical research, exploring the backstory of your characters can create an urgent need to put all of it on the page. But just as with any kind of information, you need to think about how and where you deploy it. Some kinds of stories require a lot of detail up front, and others require doling out the information—a few sentences here or there. Think about how backstory fits the tale you're trying to tell, and what you need, and where. Do not think you have to dump it all on the reader within the first couple of pages. You may be losing some narrative possibilities, too, by not holding back.
- ***Disconnect between environment and character point of view.*** To some extent, even from within a third-person point of view, you have an obligation not to lard the narrative and the characters with excessive description or description *not truly related to the viewpoint character*. What do I mean by this? I mean that setting is character. Everything your viewpoint character sees or experiences is filtered through that person's perspective. That perspective, which impacts setting, is influenced by heredity/ethnicity, upbringing, education, social and economic standing, and many other factors. One character will notice certain things about their environment, which must be given over to the reader, and *not* notice other things, which should be invisible to the reader or, perhaps, implied by their absence. For example, you might notice the sound of gunfire in any context, but your character might be so used to it that it's as ordinary as the

WRITING CHALLENGE

Imagine your main character is the woman buying lobsters and the man behind the counter is a bit player. Is it clear there can be dramatic potential in knowing what kind of day the man behind the counter is having, and that it could impact your main character's life? Now reverse the situation so the man behind the counter is your main character. How does the customer's demeanor affect your main character's day?

sound of cars on the highway. Failure to account for this is a lost opportunity with regard to characterization.

- ***Seeing your characters clearly, without prejudice or stereotyping.*** Pulitzer Prize winner Junot Díaz probably put it best when he told me about his own evolution in writing characters: "All the received sexist homophobic patriarchal scripts I internalized certainly didn't help me write good characters and had to be undone or at least confronted before I could begin to write at all. I always say: We boy writers stink at writing women, and it takes a lot of remediation before most of us can write women who approach the human level." All of your characters should be fully human, whatever that means in terms of your approach. Buying in to stereotype and cliché about your characters condemns them to act in ways that are based on false ideas about people in the real world. If you do buy in to stereotype, it should be because you are making some comment about society. For example, a female character objectified by a male character in a story should happen not because you as the writer are oblivious but because your character is clueless—perhaps even as an exploration on your part of "the male gaze."
- ***Perpetuating the idea of one story through the characters whose lives you portray.*** Although the situation is changing, the dominant story in Western culture still tends to feature middle-class heterosexual white men and women. Putting thought into who you write about and why can help to push back against the idea of there being just one story about a few groups of people. As Díaz says,

Junot Díaz as photographed by Nina Subin; the author's thoughts on the colonization of the body and mind by prejudice are required reading for fiction writers.

"You grow up in the United States long enough as a poor immigrant of color and you learn very quickly that narratives by people of color are not considered universal—but white people stories of course are. You learn that poor people are not as worthy protagonists as non-poor and that immigrant tales are rarely considered as 'American' as, say, a book about non-immigrant Americans. You learn that a book about surviving rape is not considered as 'important' as a book about a sensitive young man surviving one of our imbecilic wars."

Creating Further Depth and Nuance

Beyond knowing some of the basics about your characters and thinking about the arc of their progression through the story, certain other considerations may bring additional depth, complexity, and complication. For example, how we receive information about people, which ties in to how we write about them, is reinforced by what Karin Lowachee calls "ways of perception." These ways are best expressed as four questions:

- What do people think of the character? (Let's call her Sarah.)
- What does Sarah think people think about her?
- How does Sarah think about herself?
- What's the actual truth about Sarah? (Is there an actual, objective truth, in your view?)

When I consider these questions, I am reminded of the work of **John le Carré**, a favorite novelist of mine, who often conveys ideas about character perception in his fiction because his spies are seeking insights similar to those sought by a writer. In *The Russia House*, for example, a character says "in certain types of life . . . a player has such grotesque fantasies about another . . . that he winds up by *inventing the enemy he needs*." And in *Smiley's People*, le Carré writes, "Some people transmit . . . Some people—you meet them, and they bring you their whole past as a natural gift. *Some people are intimacy itself.*" (Italics my own.)

John le Carré's novels form an extended master class on a variety of creative-writing topics. Something in the spy-story structure lays bare the mechanisms of his technique just enough for fellow writers to profitably study them, without these mechanisms ever being so apparent that they hinder a reader's enjoyment.

Indeed, depending on what interests you as a writer, there may be an entire tale just in the answers to Lowachee's questions. Joyce Carol Oates's "The Corn Maiden" exemplifies this, in its examination of a teenager's kidnapping by a dysfunctional fellow student and the repercussions. "The Corn Maiden" could be said to be about nothing but the disconnect, contradiction, and conflict between points of view. This becomes explicit in a brilliant scene where Oates interweaves the points of view of the dysfunctional student and the substitute teacher who will be framed for the crime. Oates reveals what the two know about each other and their opinions of each other, side by side with their self-impressions. *"He had a quick engaging ironic laugh. She had a high-pitched nasal-sniggering laugh that surprised her suddenly, like a sneeze."* Because of how it creates proximity, this approach gives the reader a more complete understanding of both characters than if Oates had written two separate scenes. This technique also more perfectly expresses the character's motivations and does more to advance the story.

But there are many other ways to create nuance and depth for your characters. Here are five specific ideas that push beyond the **basics**:

The effect of environment on characters is covered in Chapter 6.

- Consistent inconsistency
- Action versus thought
- Transfer of energy
- People as symbols
- The secret life of objects

By ***consistent inconsistency***, I mean that even the most consistent people . . . really aren't as consistent as you might think. The truth is, we all operate from a kind of floating core of base habits, beliefs, knowledge, and underlying assumptions about the world. This alliance of elements, otherwise known as your mind, fluctuates from day to day depending in part on all kinds of environmental factors—but also because we aren't as logic-based as we'd like to believe. This results in a variety of sometimes contradictory actions and reactions. A man gives money to the Find-a-Penguin-a-Home charity in the morning but kicks a stray penguin on the street at lunch. A woman is polite to her obnoxious neighbor every morning, but on the day she doesn't get her morning coffee she inexplicably kicks over that neighbor's potted plants on the way to her car. Any number of factors beyond our own floating hold on a concentrated consciousness can affect behavior and thought: stress, fatigue, bad news, contrariness. Sometimes a story can simply explore the reasons behind a person's seemingly inexplicable action on a particular day. "There was someone else inside him," says the wife of a spy in le Carré's *A Perfect Spy*. "It wasn't him."

Having a sense of your character's base range of actions, responses, and emotions is important, but so is knowing that the person might not abide by them in every situation. Creating consistent inconsistency can be a powerful way to liberate your character from a preordained path you have set for them—and more interesting for the reader, too.

OPPOSITE
"Transfer of Energy and Emotion" by Ninni Aalto. Actions may have multiple, and far-reaching, consequences.

Action versus thought in some ways mirrors the effects created by Buckell's "need versus want." The fact is, in the real world we may admire the sentiments and ideas

a person expresses, but we tend to assess or judge them by their actions. The more dysfunction between what a character actually does and what they say or think, the less the reader will trust the character. Similarly, if a character is all talk and no action, not only will a reader become suspicious, that reader may also begin to distrust the character. In the crudest example, let's again look at that man who kicked the penguin at lunch. The person who says they love animals but then kicks a penguin is a worse villain in many ways than the one who says "I hate penguins" and then proceeds to kick one. At least the second villain is being **honest** (or not as self-delusional).

People tend to build up favorable mythologies or narratives about themselves that even facts like penguin-kicking will not change.

Transfer of energy is closely aligned with these other ideas. In the most basic way, positive or negative energy generated by one person tends to affect others. Another crude example: A father shouts at his adopted talking penguin, and the penguin kicks the family cat, who then goes off and needlessly tortures a mouse. Or the woman who compliments the neighborhood mailman, and the mailman comes home in a good mood and suggests unexpectedly to his spouse that they go out to eat.

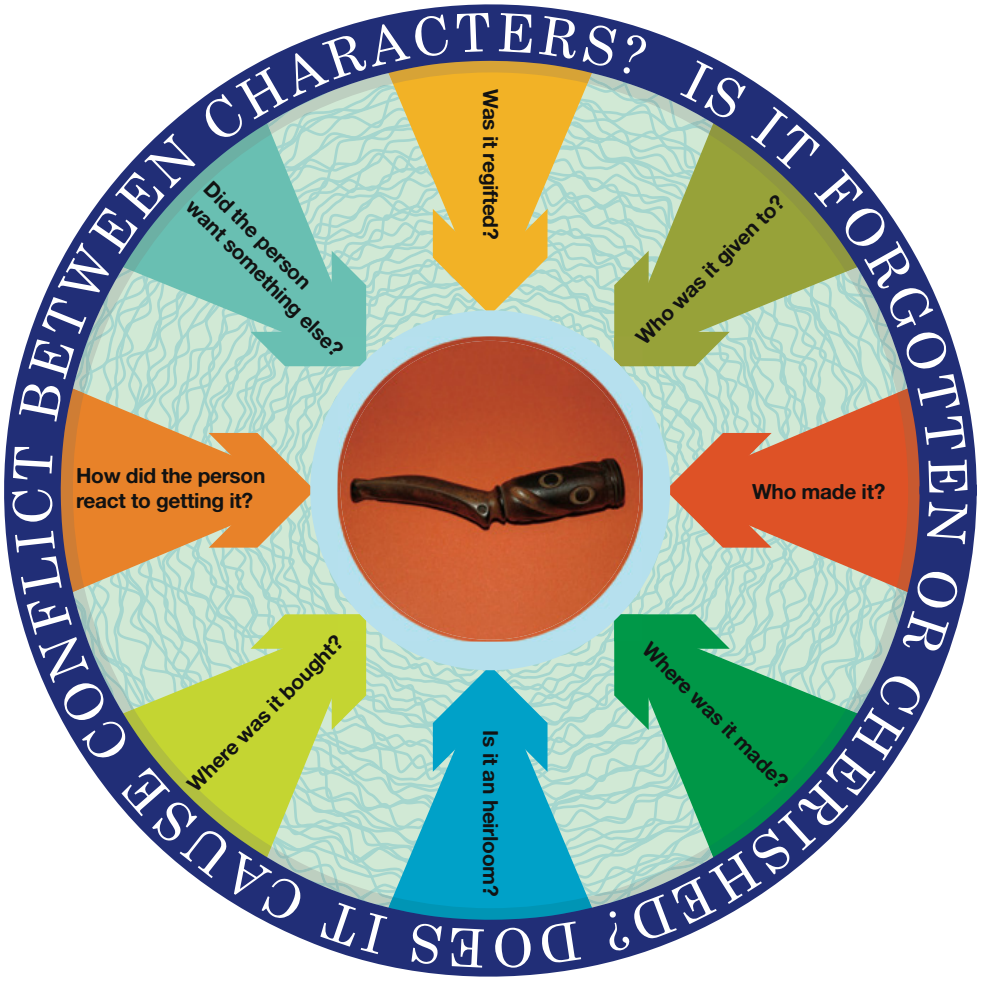
Transfer of energy can also refer to one event revealing the emotions connected to another event. Some people have trouble confronting their feelings about a traumatic event, especially if there's been no natural opportunity for closure. It may take the next event or encounter similar in structure or emotion to push the issues connected to the prior event out into the open. For example, the man who starts to weep when his wife's father dies—someone he hardly knew—but is really grieving for his grandmother who died the year before. In a wider sense, then, transfer of energy is just one exploration of the emotional lives of your characters.

The concept of ***people as symbols or ideas*** acknowledges that even a friendship may be more than it seems (and less). For example, the widow who befriends someone who knew her dead husband as a way of holding on to her spouse. Or, the friendship during World War II between two men that begins to have an added element or layer because of political upheaval. A city taken by rebel forces or divided amongst the victors can mean the other person is the only link to a place that no longer exists. People represent more than their selves to other people. A person can be as symbolic as a building or a historical date.

Finally, the ***secret life of objects*** reverses the idea of people as ideas to consider how objects are the *emissaries* of people—especially in the attachment we have to our possessions. Do not discount the power of objects—or think of things, as opposed to characters, as inert or lifeless in narrative. The general degree to which a character values objects may tell us something important about them, something significant. An object can contain whole worlds, and motivate people to all sorts of actions. *Things* symbolize or epitomize physical wealth or a connection to the past or to a particular person or memory. Because of this, they can bolster and enhance characterization—something even more important, perhaps, in a fantastical setting, where you may need to describe more of the setting anyway. Why not make that description do more than one thing? The photographs someone keeps in their office or on the mantel at home are significant, as are the paintings they choose to hang on the walls.

Sometimes a whole story can result just from these attachments. For example, I recently watched a drama play out when a relative (let's call her Gertrude) gave another relative (let's call her Emily) a family heirloom, an expensive watch, but

The Secret Life of Objects



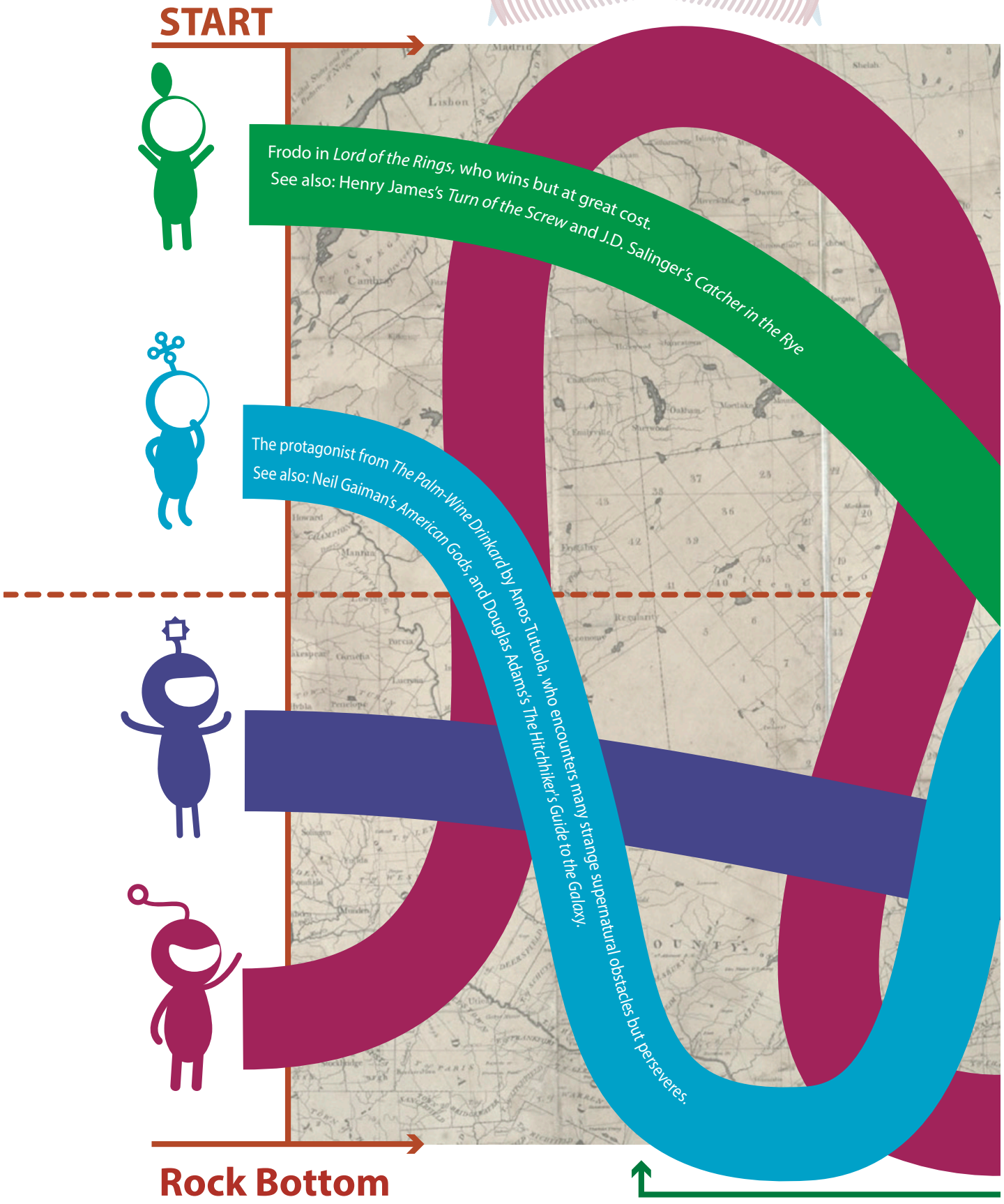
then the giver's husband demanded Gertrude get the watch back because he had originally gifted it to her. This created a lot of tension between Gertrude and Emily and reopened old wounds, old memories. When Emily finally gave Gertrude the watch back, Gertrude felt so guilty that she eventually sent the watch to Emily once more, but then would periodically, halfheartedly, ask for it back. This time Emily refused, creating bad blood with the husband. Out of this situation also came the revelation that Gertrude, an older woman, was experiencing episodes during which her short-term memory was failing her and had forgotten that her husband had given her the watch. Meanwhile, the watch itself requires constant maintenance or it will never work again, and so Emily is constantly reminded of the situation because she has to keep wearing the watch so she can tend to it. And because Emily is not a rich woman and her job takes her to high-crime areas, wearing a very expensive watch makes her nervous . . . . Suddenly, you can see how an event revolving around a single object can have reverberations that spread well beyond the initial situation.

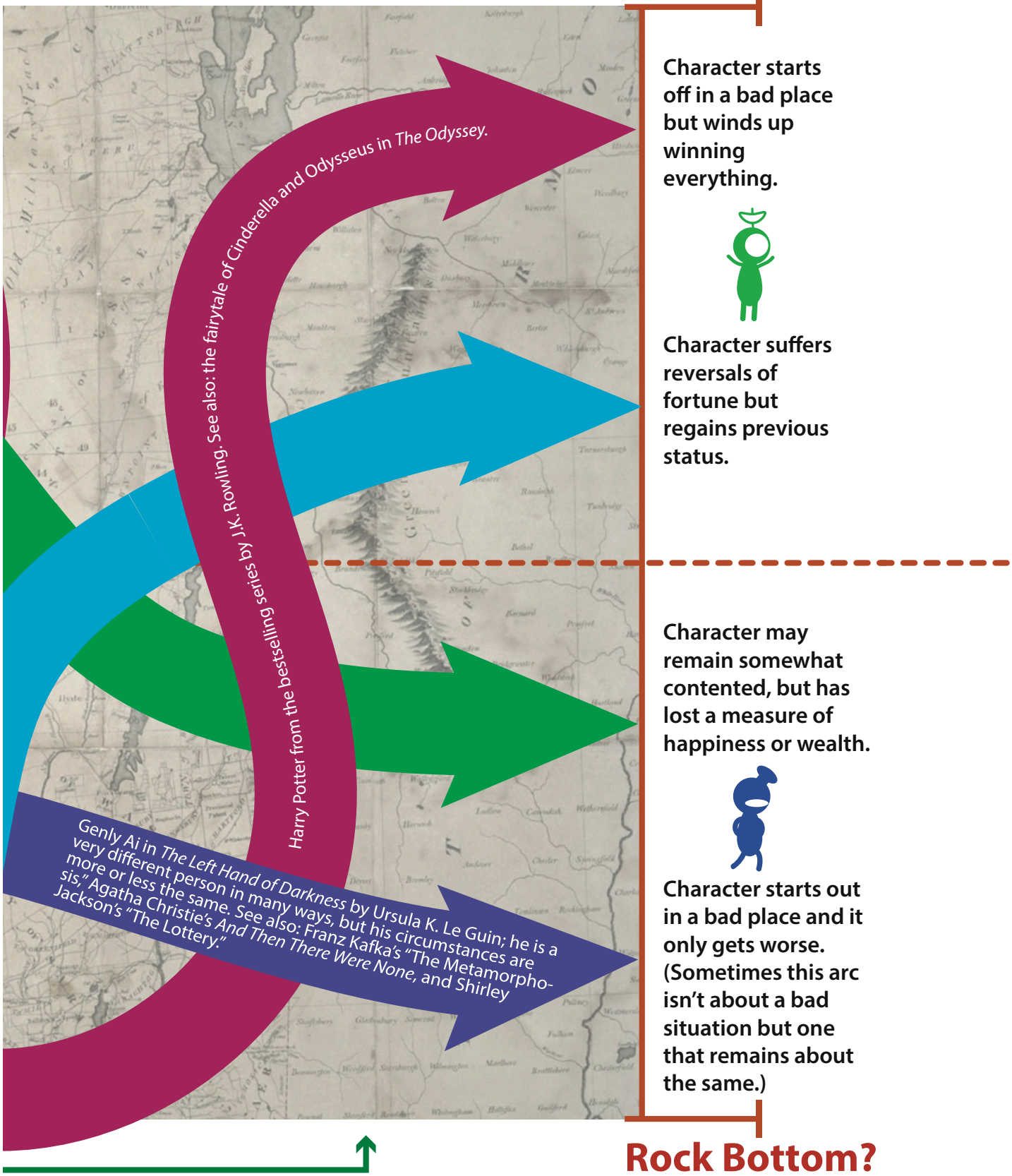
This cigarette-holder is an heirloom in my family. Inside, through a drilled hole, you can see microfiche showing photographs of a resistance cell from World War I. This object became a vital part of a character's history in one of my novels.

Questions that suggest themselves in contemplating these ideas about creating depth and nuance include:

ESSAY ON HEIRLOOMS

Character Arcs




FINISH
Character starts off in a bad place but winds up winning everything.
Character suffers reversals of fortune but regains previous status.
Character may remain somewhat contented, but has lost a measure of happiness or wealth.
Character starts out in a bad place and it only gets worse. (Sometimes this arc isn't about a bad situation but one that remains about the same.)
Rock Bottom?
Harry Potter from the bestselling series by J.K. Rowling. See also: the fairytale of Cinderella and Odysseus in The Odyssey.
Genly Ai in The Left Hand of Darkness by Ursula K. Le Guin; he is a very different person in many ways, but his circumstances are more or less the same. See also: Franz Kafka's "The Metamorphosis," Agatha Christie's And Then There Were None, and Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery."
How different are the character's fortunes at the story's middle compared to the beginning? Could the story you tell end earlier and still form an "arc"?

- How much does another character's view of a given situation differ from the main character's view?
- What kinds of actions do characters take that aren't really about finding a solution to their problems?
- To what extent are characters secretly at odds or in disagreement with other people?
- How much does your character reveal to other people how that character feels about them? How much is held back?
- How does a character use or not use the secrets in their possession?
- How do secrets spread—and to whom? (And why to those particular people?)
- What kinds of information, if known, would give other people power over your character? (How much control would your character then have over their own actions?)
- How quickly, in the right context, can one character's view or opinion of another character change?
- How attached to material possessions is your character, and how does this shape behavior?
- How much does your character want to please others?
- What will your character give up to get something, including approval, from another character?

These are just a few areas in which you can create more nuance and depth for your characters. For certain types of stories, such ideas may in fact be essential. For others, they may simply help you to jump-start characters, scenes, or stories that seem too rote or formulaic.

Character Arcs

The idea of a character arc refers to the character's journey and also usually has a connection to the plot or *is* the plot. This term can mean something specific and practical or it can mean something mythic and archetypal. In the former instance, I largely mean the position from which your character starts, what happens to them during the story, and where they end up as a result. This may or may not, as the chapter on narrative design should make clear, be the sum total of the story—its point. Charles Dickens wrote at least one, if not several, novels about poor people who either make good or don't make good, for example. In tragedies, a character may start at a high level and be brought low. In more balanced dramas, the character may start lower, and then achieve some kind of permanent success through great struggle and hardship. In comedies, the character may start at a high level, swing very low, and then return to their prior state or some version of it.

These character arcs are not necessarily archetypal, however. An archetypal character journey requires mythic or universal elements that we believe play out again and again across history and may also include moments that we experience on an almost gut or subconscious level as profoundly right. As with theme, writers often access such

A Mexican Wrestler Version of Joseph Campbell's Monomyth?

What might a Luchadore (Mexican wrestler) version of Joseph Campbell's Hero's Journey look like? First of all, it might eschew the language and symbolism of the standard quest—the journey that resembles the standard heroic fantasy novel—in favor of references to gyms and tournaments. Second, it would reflect the complex role played by the Tecnicos (the good guys) and the Rudos (the bad guys). In the Mexican wrestling world, Tecnicos often become Rudos, and vice versa. Masks are also very important in this tradition.

In such a story, the supernatural aid might come from the ghost of famed wrestler El Santo telling Hector, a humble carpenter, that in another realm the Rudos have thrown off the rule of the Tecnicos. Perhaps Hector must take up his father's legacy to restore the rightful balance—finding the world beyond the real through an odd door in the back of a local gym.

Once there, he must fight his way through a wrestling labyrinth located inside a huge mountain, one of many trials before he meets Rapturous Demise, the Queen of the female wrestlers. Following her wise guidance, the story might open up into a road trip through the unreal world, each step marked by temptations as well as tournaments and wrestling matches—against the Blue Demon, against The Big Death, against Rock Made of Rock. Along the way, Hector, renamed El Topo—"Holy Mountain"—meets his father and, after much conflict, receives the man's blessing, and his wrestler mask. Then would come the final bouts with the Blue Demon and, of course, the main villain, the Man of a Thousand Masks. El Topo, at great cost, might emerge victorious, restoring the rule of the Tecnicos.

El Topo would rule for years in that place before being drawn back to the real world, achieving mastery of both places. Hector/El Topo would live a long life, teaching his children every lesson learned in our world and the next. Sometimes the ghost of El Santo would still visit him, and if he is seen by his grandchildren smiling as he talks to himself, well, they have the grace to grant him some secrets. ❧

Thanks to Barth Anderson for research.

archetypes by instinct, as part of being embedded in a particular culture or gestalt. Perhaps the most famous of these character arcs is Joseph Campbell's hero's journey, otherwise known as the "monomyth." Many writers swear by this character arc, even though, as writer John Crowley notes, it may be something absorbed without conscious thought.

"It's vital to me," says writer Stephen Graham Jones, author of *Growing Up Dead in Texas*. "It's so deep in my head that I don't even think about it anymore. Without it, I don't know where I'd be, having to figure it all out by trial and error. The way I see it, he mapped it all out for us once and forever, and it's perfect, adaptable, in need of nothing."

The journey Jones's characters typically take "is pretty much Odysseus's ride through Hades. They start out up top, they think they have to go lower, they do, it sucks, and they sometimes make it back to the daylight." For Jones, something about Campbell's approach speaks clearly to his particular interests as a writer—it is personal.

What does the hero's journey consist of? Several key events or moments that map to three phases of the journey: Separation, Initiation, and Return.

- ***Separation***. During this initial phase, the hero must receive a call to adventure, initially refuse that call in some way, and then reconsider the quest. Usually, a supernatural element makes itself known to the hero and convinces the hero to accept the quest. The end of the separation phase sees the hero crossing a threshold into the land of adventure: the place where the story mostly takes place. This can be a metaphorical transition, but often it is a literal one, into a fantastical world, for example.
- ***Initiation***. During this phase, the hero must first endure a final separation from the world or idea of the world before the adventure began. Then, the hero faces a series of tests. Some tests are physical, some mental. In addition to the tests that naturally occur as a result of the quest, the hero must: "meet the goddess" and thus experience unconditional love; resist various temptations; reconcile with his father, or a father-like figure; experience some sort of death and rebirth, again literal or figurative; and achieve the goal of the journey or quest. At the end of the initiation phase, the hero often refuses to return to the world he knew before he accepted the call to adventure.
- ***Return***. During this phase, the hero decides to indeed go back to the world he knew before, but to do so he requires help, sometimes of a magical sort. In successfully returning to his old world, the hero becomes the master of both, achieving a balance between the physical and the spiritual realms. He then is able to lead a peaceful and fulfilling life, while sharing his wisdom with others.

MEXICAN WRESTLER MONOMYTH

Although this might seem like a stylized or highly ritualistic approach to storytelling, writers easily disguise the subtext all the time, using this structure for the most realistic and the most surreal of adventures. In this chapter, I've reimagined the hero's journey as the quest of a Mexican wrestler, to show how it can be repurposed across cultures. But I've also included what I consider an "antidote" via Michael Cisco's rendition of what he calls "the zero's relapse."

Michael Cisco Presents: The Zero's Relapse

Michael Cisco is the author of novels The Divinity Student, The Tyrant, The San Veneficio Canon, The Traitor, The Narrator, The Great Lover, *and* Celebrant. *His short fiction is collected in* Secret Hours, *and has appeared in* The Thackery T. Lambshead Pocket Guide to Eccentric & Discredited Diseases, Lovecraft Unbound, The Weird, *and elsewhere.*

The Relapse takes the form of a series of orbits which are rendered as circles merely for the sake of convenience in representation, as the actual orbits may be entirely shapeless. These orbits do not revolve around a center of gravity, but will always pass through the same point or nodus, which is the World Anus, or point of universal emission, where each orbit, however eccentric or irregular, however distinct in flavor or tenor, is compressed and folded into a single compact mass prior to its rejection. It is the persistent rejective action of the World Anus that drives the series of relaptative orbits.

As each orbit is passed by the World Anus, the acute investigator will observe the secondary expression of an ethereal residue precipitated from the opening on a trajectory tangential to the general oscillative orientation of the relapse. This prolapsed material flees the Aeolian bag of winds while failing to reduce its momentum, although the pressure built up in the World Anus prior to the departure of the afflatal ventura can act as a propellant with respect to the next iteration of the cycle.

PICKING UP SOMEWHERE IN THE MIDDLE

Sudden Death—The point-of-view figure is either already dead or killed right away, or looks back from death. In any case, the trajectory has no beginning to speak of, but dawns with death.

Forced to Go On—The point-of-view figure is too perverse or stupid to die, and/or qualifies for a job.

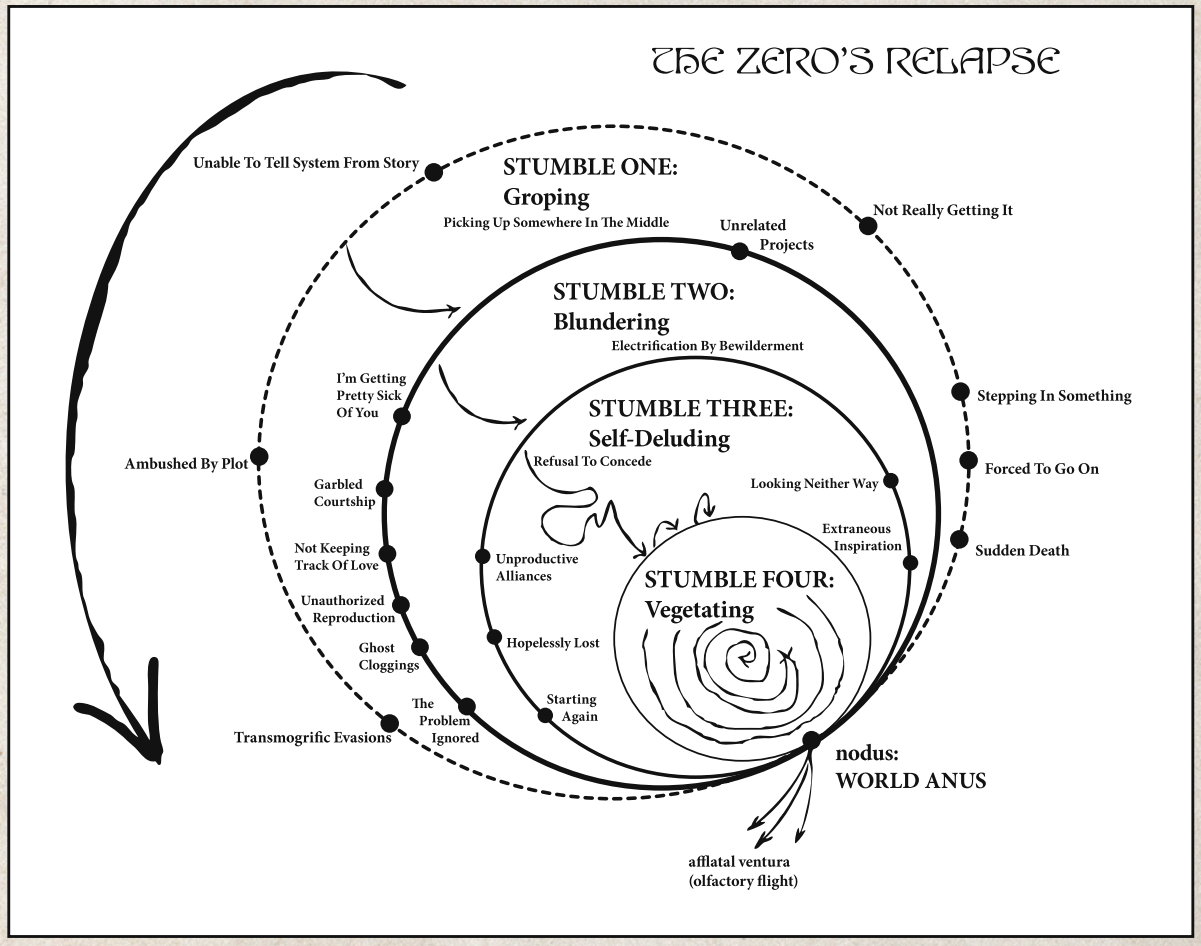
Stepping in Something—A proto-person whose background is of little to no importance wanders into a pre-existing set of as yet only partially configured circumstances.

Not Really Getting It—The proto-person and the situation begin to shape each other. The proto-person typically doesn't understand this, either thinking that the situation is far more developed than it is, or acting with an inadequate grasp of the extent of his or her ability to influence that situation.

Unable to Tell System from Story—Unaccountable events could indicate the operation of an independent supernatural system, or the proto-person is noting the activity of the story itself as it shapes him or her. Since the system or story is no less ignorant and unformed than is the proto-person, it forms him or her as ineptly as he or she forms it.

Ambushed by Plot—As the proto-person evolves into a protantagonist, or self-opposing tangle, he or she will be attacked by a plot, which endeavors to confine the protantagonist in a character mold, exactly suited to a series of already familiar events that are arranged in the most easily predictable order.

Transmogrific Evasions—The protantagonist evades capture by the plot. This is accomplished by means of a series of contortions in behavior and derangements of thinking. The resulting confusion is sufficiently deep to affect the protantagonist, as well, so that,



becoming lost, he or she loses the bloodhounds of the plot as well.

ELECTRIFICATION BY BEWILDERMENT

Unrelated Projects—Having escaped the plot, which continues to unfold and to be influenced by the protantagonist negatively by his or her absence, the protantagonist, who has purchased freedom at the cost of multiplying confusions, exuberantly does whatever he or she wants to do instead. This usually involves a vainglorious pursuit that is extremely arduous, highly unusual, dangerous, and expensive.

I'm Getting Pretty Sick of You—The attention of the narrative starts to wander as the protantagonist loses its interest. It will revert to the protantagonist whenever he or she does something especially interesting, but this phase of the cycle often involves the introduction of new, more compelling characters. The narrative appears to become anxious to prove that it can sustain a well-fashioned traditional-type character, often with a skillfully constructed backstory.

Garbled Courtship—The protantagonist meets another character, making a bad impression. Nevertheless, these meetings are repeated, and an effort is made to establish clearer communications. These efforts consistently result in partial failures, which are usually not noticed, so that both parties are confident they understand each other perfectly. The other character is far more often right about the protantagonist than he or she is about them.

Not Keeping Track of Love—The protantagonist is too busy with the unrelated projects and neglects the other character. Lack of attention causes the other character dissatisfaction and anger, which are also misunderstood and under-recognized by the protantagonist.

Unauthorized Reproduction—The protantagonist

creates other characters, whether they are living beings or technological contrivances or resurrected from the dead, as a consequence of Unrelated Projects. These beings are typically released into the world to wreak havoc at random.

Ghost Cloggings—As the plot continues to unfold incorrectly, malfunctions and structural failures increase. Unable to find outlets in ordinary action, cause-and-effect chains, and scenes, various participants in the plot—characters, objects, settings, even symbols—break halfway back into the protantagonist's circumstances, manifesting as apparitions that interfere with a clear view of events.

The Problem Ignored—Since the protantagonist has no idea that he or she has anything to do with the precipitation of these ghostly apparitions, he or she just keeps going as before, ascribing meanings of his or her own to the apparitions and further estranging them from the impacted plot.

REFUSAL TO CONCEDE

Extraneous Inspiration—The protantagonist suddenly believes he understands the true nature of the apparitions and the nature of the story he or she is living. This conception has nothing to do with the nature of the original plot.

Looking Neither Way—Having settled on this new conception of the nature of the story, the protantagonist wildly guesses at his or her role in that story, and adopts this role with excessive assurance. This usually involves an additional spate of inventions, the heedless abandoning of his or her former love interest, and a great deal of additional activity.

Unproductive Alliances—At this point, the protantagonist will call on the various ghostly projections and other characters to reassemble in altered juxtapositions in an effort to realize a fantasized destiny.

Hopelessly Lost—The plan fails, despite the fact that everything and everyone involved performed their part correctly.

Starting Again—Armed with the now-proven knowledge that such an approach cannot succeed, the protantagonist self-disintegrates into component elements that collect in an inert mass, steadily sinking into the fundament of existence. ➽

Why would Campbell's hero's journey require antidotes? Well, for one thing we can't all be heroes or write about heroes. So perhaps part of the answer lies in the very title, "The Hero's Journey," and in a writer's suspicion of what has been codified as canon. But there are other reasons, like the gender roles in Campbell's version. An antidote could take the form of depicting a female-specific journey, in which the women encountered by the main (female) character are more diverse and complex in their roles.

Campbell's ideas also derive largely from Western philosophy and religion; their universality may not be as universal as we think. As writer Vandana Singh says, "All distillations of complex phenomena (such as epic stories) that promise to be universal are suspect. Even in physics there are very few truly universal laws. . . . From the Indian epic perspective you might consider the *Ramayana* to be a close fit to the

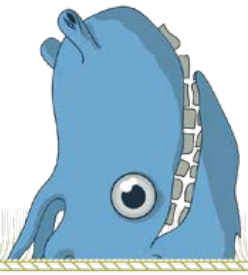
hero's journey, but on the other hand there are various retellings of the *Ramayana*, among them some from the point of view of Sita, the consort of the hero, Ram. Her story doesn't follow the arc. If you consider the *Mahabharata*, you might also find parallels, but the story is so complicated by multiple threads and so populated with characters that there is no true one hero on his lonely quest. Even less of a fit is the *Kathasaritsagara*, with its labyrinthine structure that keeps pulling you into different point-of-view characters."

Whether you tend more toward a practical or archetypal approach, examining the path your characters take may help you to bring out or de-emphasize certain aspects of that journey when you finalize the story. This effort may even solve deficiencies of plot or structure.

If you get stuck, remember what may seem simple: We all have obsessions, and we all have complex emotions. Remember what your characters most desire and how they express that desire. Also remember that no one can, or should, know everything about the characters they create. As the terrifically talented John Crowley says:

> I really don't know how to create characters. I tend to respond to inner promptings that are like those by which we understand people in dreams. I don't construct them, as some writers do, to do the tasks set for them; nor do I let them go, and follow their adventures. I know where they are going, but not how they'll think about getting there. Those whose hearts I can't (or won't) look into, in the way fiction can, are the most mysterious. I often don't know what they are inside, even if I know their power over characters I can inhabit. Like people in dreams.

"Nadal Baronio" by Óscar Sanmartín (2006). From the book *Leyendario Criaturas de Agua* written by Óscar Sipán and illustrated by Sanmartín.



All fiction writers engage in some form of worldbuilding whether they call it that or call it creation of "setting" or "milieu." Even in the most extreme experimental cases, the writer can be said to have taken a position. Plonking down a tree in a desert along with two guys waiting for a third who never arrives still constitutes a setting. A "world" can be as small as a storage closet and as large as an entire universe; indeed, some stories have taken place on the underside of a leaf, within a single droplet of water.

Chapter 6: Worldbuilding

Every setting of every piece of fiction ever written is by definition a product of someone's imagination—and to some extent, therefore, phantasmagorical and, yes, fantastical, because it does not exist in our reality the way it does on the page, no matter how we might try to provide an illusion of a one-to-one ratio. For that matter, your version of, say, Chicago, is vastly different than the talking penguin's version. Indeed, for the reason of *subjective interpretation* alone it is impossible to truly replicate reality.

I make this observation about worldbuilding to point out that even "realistic" fiction is not really all that realistic—any more than fictional dialogue of most sorts is like speech in real life. Instead, realistic fiction favors one particular *stance* or *position* over another and then builds a construct to support the stance. The approaches taken by some writers of nonrealistic fiction just tend to be more noticeable—the irony being that many fantasy writers use realistic techniques to achieve their effects. The location of your stories on the map of fiction does not necessarily determine your stance. For example, Salvador Dalí created extremely surreal, fantastical paintings using intricate, realistic detail at the brushstroke or "sentence" level. The overall effect is nonrealistic but the method is a form of intense devotion to realism. Similarly, in works like his *Books of Blood*, Clive Barker engages in excesses of grotesquerie that only work because they often occur against a backdrop of the mundane.

"Utopia" by Victo Ngai (2012). Sometimes a whole world can exist in the maw of a giant frog.

This idea of "stance" or "position" is important in a wider context because we need to be honest about the term "worldbuilding." Within the closed vessel of a story or novel we may indeed be constructing an ecosystem, each part dependent on and affecting the others. But no matter how complete we might try to be, we cannot truly build a world, as this witty passage from Lewis Carroll's *Sylvie and Bruno Concluded* exemplifies:

> "That's another thing we've learned from *your* Nation," said Mein Herr, "map-making. But we've carried it much further than *you*. What do you consider the *largest* map that would be really useful?"
>
> "About six inches to the mile."
>
> "Only *six inches*!" exclaimed Mein Herr. "We very soon got to six *yards* to the mile. Then we tried a *hundred* yards to the mile. And then came the grandest idea of all! We actually made a map of the country on the scale of *a mile to the mile*."

"Have you used it much?" I enquired.

"It has never been spread out, yet," said Mein Herr: "the farmers objected: they said it would cover the whole country and shut out the sunlight! So we now use the country itself as its own map, and I assure you it does nearly as well. Now let me ask you *another* question. What is the smallest *world* you would care to inhabit?"

You can use Google for about ten minutes and discover a wealth of information about our own world—delving down into details about countries, governments, cities, cultures, history, religions, and ecosystems that convey some idea of Earth's complexity. But consider that even when we are *literally mapping the world*, we make decisions to condense, provide approximations, and in other ways reduce the world to signs, symbols, and approximations.

In fiction, we make the same kinds of decisions about setting as about character; we never include everything, any more than we would be exhaustive about a person's backstory. You are creating a *model* of a world, putting only certain elements of that model into play. Otherwise, you and your reader would get hopelessly lost in the details.

Myrtle Von Damitz III's "All Our Fictional Worlds" (see next page) was inspired by "Un Autre Monde" (1844) by J. J. Grandville. The painting catalogues different types of settings, as explained by the artist. 1—*Kafka's Shed*. 2—*The Carnival Masquerade*: the fantastical and the numinous. 3—*The Supernatural Lands Between*. 4—*The Faerie Realms*. 5—*Earth Prime: Our Reality*. 6—*Alternate History Earth: Might-Have-Been* (poles reversed on all maps). 7—*Parallel Earth* (continents different from ours). 8—*Secondary Worlds* (Middle Earth, Narnia, etc.). 9—*Mathematical and Mechanical Worlds* (radically different technology or worlds created from mathematical theory). 10—*Metaphysical Worlds* (Borges, Calvino, infinite libraries and other wonders). 11—*Satirical Worlds* ("Best" meaning "the best of all possible worlds" from *Candide*). 12—*Future Earths* ("human-made, floating barge-pods as large as continents"). 13—*Alien Worlds* (the truly different, beyond our solar system). 14—*Artificial World: Generation Ship*. 15—*Surreal Worlds: Dream Logic*. 16—*Microscopic Worlds* (a paramecium in a petri dish).


THE
BEST

"Atlantis, Beneath the Waves" by Charles Vess (2004). How does the story about a setting change over time? The myth of Atlantis originated in antiquity, with Plato, but was soon discounted and sometimes parodied. Early Christians took the myth seriously and revived it. Since then, it has featured in several mystical traditions, each time with different characteristics.

Worldview versus Storyview

So what does a fictional world really need? It depends on how you want your setting to affect the story and characters—and, ultimately, the reader. But regardless of your approach, thinking about the difference between *worldview* and *storyview* may help you in your decisions:

- ***Worldview***. What you as the writer know about the world of the story. The worldview establishes a wider context and may contain many more stories than just the one on which you are currently focused.
- ***Storyview***. What the characters know and believe about the world.

As Will Hindmarch, a writer and gaming expert, puts it, "Storyview can encompass the point of view of the story's narrator, even if that narrator is not strictly a character in the story. A third-person subjective point of view can be wrong or misinformed about the world at large—it can believe things the writer knows to be incorrect and which may, for example, be revealed as incorrect later on in the story."

Even when the writer merely withholds information about the world, "she is making use of the gap between Worldview and Storyview," according to Hindmarch. "'All the chimera are dead,' a character might say, uncorrected by the third-person narrator, even though the writer knows that in some remote corner of the world . . . a chimera still lives. The difference between Worldview and Storyview is about the information the writer chooses to share—and *when*."

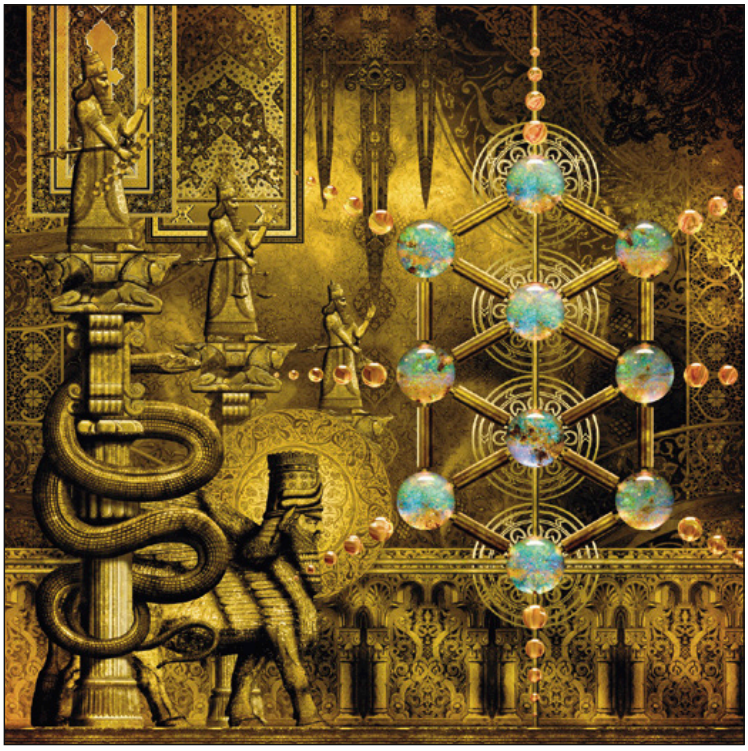
Storyview is impacted not just by the individual characters you choose to write about but also by their larger position within the world. As critically acclaimed writer Ekaterina Sedia notes in these points I've adapted from her lecture on diversity, there are at least three possible vantage points for characters:

- ***Native of the Culture***. Unless you are writing about a culture you come from or an approximation of that culture transposed into the fantastical, this is the most difficult vantage point to write from because there's a different cultural default. A common mistake is for the writer to impose their own prejudices and values; in the worst cases this results in an appropriation of another culture on a scale of failure from "seems too simplistic" to "that's offensive." Remember that people who live in a culture do not notice the common things, only deviations from normal order or something unusual. It is also important to know whether the culture the character comes from is dominant or in the minority. For example, if the dominant culture is a violent matriarchy, a member of this culture probably wouldn't comment on how overbearing a woman is, but rather would notice a woman who is

Sedia lecture

being submissive and weak. And even within minority cultures, there are huge differences in perspective—Zimbabwe not only has various tribal ethnicities and a white minority, but also a significant Chinese minority.

- ***Tourist or Visitor***. This position may be easier to write and to relate to, both for the writer and the audience, because of shared cultural values. Many ordinary things for a native will be unusual to the visitor. Depending on the insight of the individual character, they may miss nuances and misinterpret things, which can be useful in creating narrative ambiguity. However, it's generally wise to avoid the kinds of cliché encounters in which the tourist's worldview is perpetuated as unquestioningly superior to that of the people encountered by the tourist. Why? Not only is this approach common but it's boring, and usually false in some way.
- ***Conqueror or colonizer.*** This position within a worldview provides the greatest potential for conflict and willful misunderstanding. It is also a position all too common in the real world, creating situations that often affect a region for centuries. However, it may be difficult to create reader sympathy for the main character.

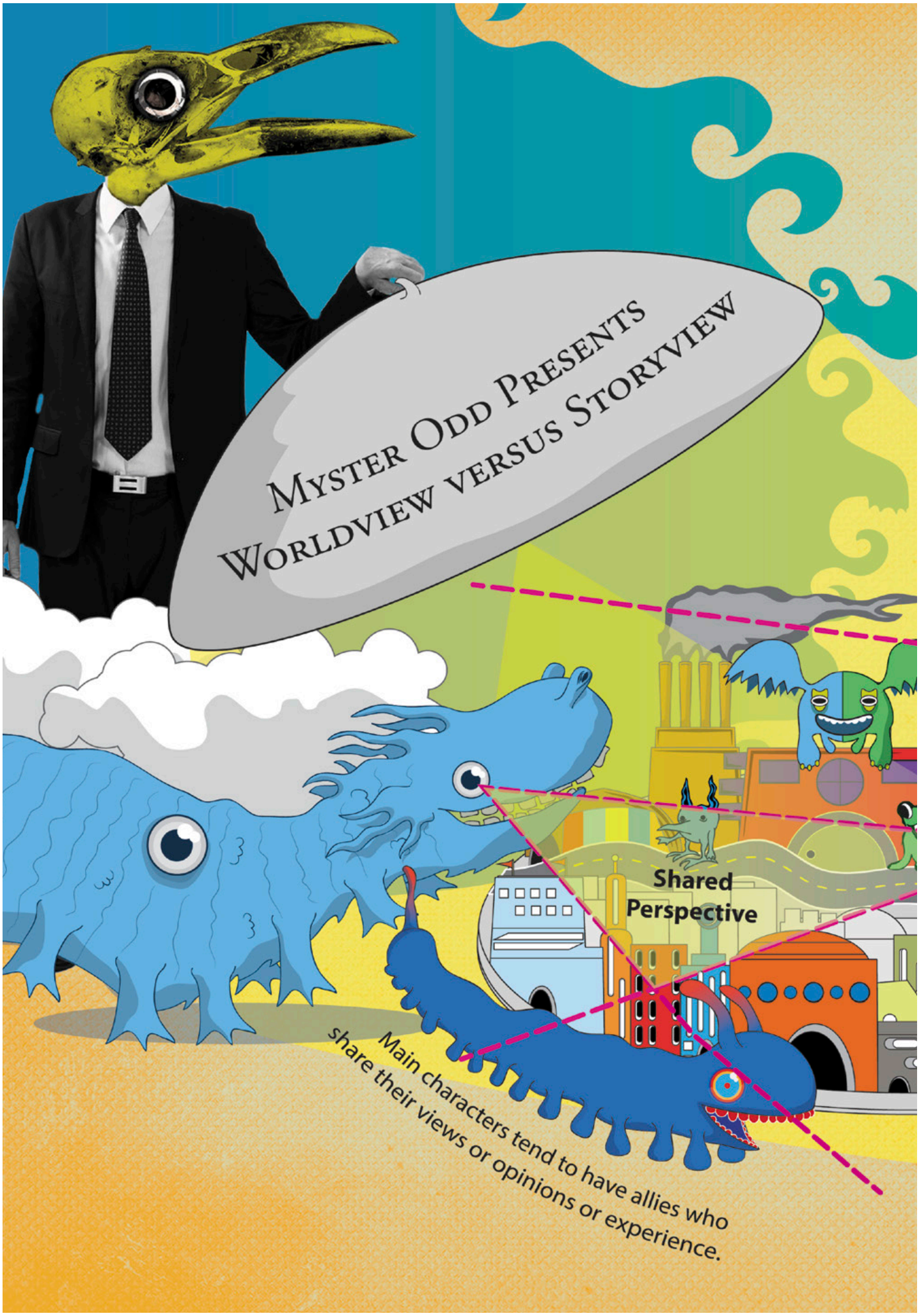


Cover art by John Coulthart for *The Epigenesis* (2010), an album by Melechsesh.

All three of these approaches to the worldview, expressed through storyview, can create interesting clashes, contradictions, and insight. The tension between what you know about the world and what the characters know often helps to create narrative.

Beyond where you position your story within a world, you also need to consider your stance on consistency and constraint. According to David Anthony Durham, who has written both the epic fantasy Acacia trilogy and historical fiction, "There's an element of freedom in worldbuilding, but I'd call it a 'responsibility,' as well—to establish the rules of your world and then live by them. I can decide to plop a desert down here and mountain range over there, but then I—and my characters—have to live with the challenges created by that. I don't unmake stuff when it poses problems. Just the opposite. Watching how the characters are bound and challenged by the things I created is what it's all about."

Sometimes, too, the kind of fiction you write may force you to place certain kinds of worldview information within the storyview. Why? Because readers make certain assumptions about the real world that they do not make about fantastical worlds. As a friend said to me once, "Fantasy can be a tougher con job than realism." For example, a character can use a telephone in the real world without the writer needing to provide details about the type of phone and the process of how you make a call.


Myster Odd Presents
Worldview versus Storyview
Shared
Perspective
Main characters tend to have allies who
share their views or opinions or experience.

- Consider for a moment a fantastical city, with two characters in conflict who may have very different experiences of that city. What Myster Odd has revealed is the World Entire, but not the world as these two know it.

- The antagonist is most familiar with the creatures and people in blue. The protagonist is most familiar with those in green. Where green and blue merge, points of common experience surface between the two.

- The antagonist grew up in the under-city beneath the street. The protagonist grew up above. This separates their experiences in another way, even if they each may have designs on the territory of the other. It speaks to what each values and does not value; it might even speak to different cultural backgrounds.

- Yet, it is clear each character has some understanding of the world the other lives in, even if it is not a complete understanding. There is a cross-section of shared perspective.

- The city entire lies before each of them, but do they see it entire? No, they do not.

These characters can affirm or undercut the main characters' view of the world they live in depending on their deeds and words.

But in a fantastical setting clearly deviating in its overall level of technology from Earth Prime, you may have to provide those kinds of details—especially what might be called *the exceptions*, if the setting otherwise adheres to our laws of science and general sense of societal norms.

As you progress along the spectrum of style and approach into the absurdist, surreal, and metaphysical, readers do not expect as much baseline *fact*, even if a story is set in the contemporary United States. At the very least—as in the surrealist fiction of Leonora Carrington or Hunter S. Thompson's nonfiction—the use of metaphor and image would be colonizing and reshaping the reality of the setting. Getting a message to a friend by talking into the maw of a giant squid might seem entirely normal to the reader in that context. Instantaneous galaxy-wide travel that entails being eaten by a giant transdimensional bear and reconstituted on the other side—the messy type of teleportation—might work best with a minimum of explanation or detail.

Characteristics of a Well-Realized Setting

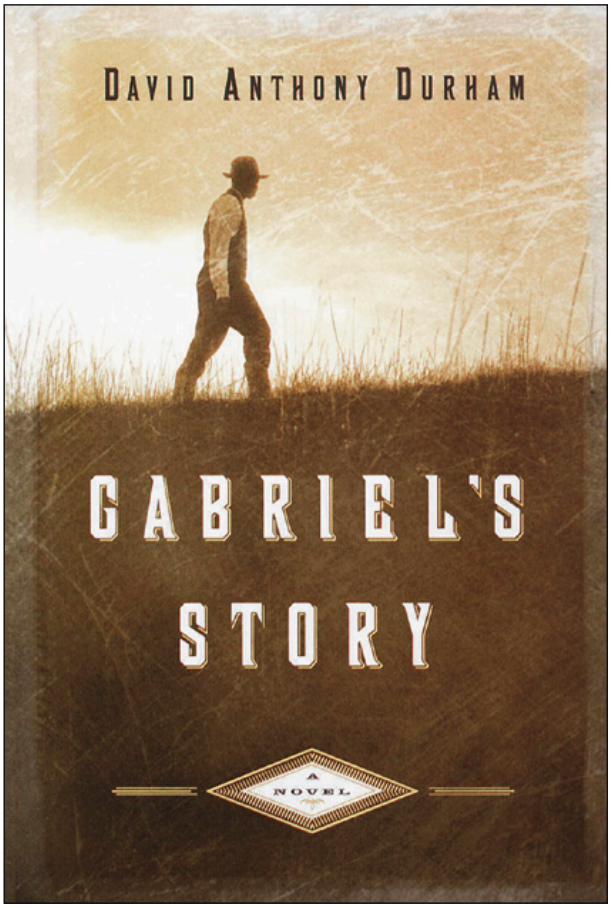
Regardless of how you approach worldview and storyview, most well-realized settings exhibit a range of particular characteristics. I do not mean to imply that every characteristic below, or even the majority of them, should be present in every scenario. These are options to think about in determining your stance. They range from the basic to the complex:

- The setting exhibits a ***coherent and consistent logic,*** and the various pieces of that world fit together to some extent. Even *Alice in Wonderland*—especially *Alice in Wonderland*—has a kind of perfect if absurd logic to its setting: It adheres to internal rules and doesn't break them. Coherence and clarity should apply to all aspects of the world, whether we are in Bag End, the industrial milieu of Michael Swanwick's *The Iron Dragon's Daughter*, or the more metaphysical locales described by M. John Harrison, Leena Krohn, or Jorge Luis Borges.

- The setting has built-in wider ***cause and effect***. We understand the overall motivations of the institutions and major players because of the historical and societal context. This, perversely, can allow for greater deviation and eccentricity within the characters, because the main thrust of their intent or motivation is clearly defined by the setting. Ursula K. Le Guin's careful study of societies in *The Dispossessed* provides a good example.

- Good and strategic uses of ***specific details*** convince the reader and do not seem jarring or unintentionally contradictory. Further, a dragon in one story should be different from a dragon in another story, and those two should not be confused with the dragon in a third. J. K. Rowling isn't the most descriptive of writers, but she picks the right details. When she shows you a hippogriff flying, you believe

EXTENDED ANALYSIS OF A SETTING



SPOTLIGHT ON **DAVID ANTHONY DURHAM**

David Anthony Durham is the author of six novels: The Sacred Band, The Other Lands, Acacia, Pride of Carthage, Walk Through Darkness, *and* Gabriel's Story *(*New York Times *Notable Book, 2002 Legacy Award). His books have been published in the UK and in nine foreign languages.*

"For my first novel, I wanted to make readers see, feel, and smell life in a sod house on the Kansas prairie in the 1870s. How could I pull that off, though? I wasn't alive in the 1870s. Nobody I knew was. I'd never lived in a sod house, and I'd only ever driven through Kansas. So where to start? Research, of course. But having a list of materials sod houses were built with and a scattering of black-and-white photos doesn't bring what living in one would be like to life. Reading first-person accounts comes closer. I wanted to provide the intimacy of a first-person account with the large construct of a hopefully compelling narrative.

"So, I put myself—and readers, I hope—on the shoulder of a character like Gabriel, an Easterner newly arrived in the West. We step off the train with him. Ride in the wagon out on to the expanse of grasslands. With him, we climb down from the wagon late that night and see the low, dark mound of a thing he's going to live in. We lie on the cot, listening to insects in the walls and the mice in the roof and the snoring and farting of the other people in the one room. And we look at the old, battered stove that heats the place with dried cow dung. We don't need to know the make and model of the stove because Gabriel doesn't know it either. He sees it, though, and I wanted readers to as well: the shape and look of it, the smell of it, the low light it casts about the room. For me, those details—real ones combined with imagined ones—build the suspension of disbelief." ❧

WRITING CHALLENGE

Take a close look at Aeron Alfrey's flying city (2009). Several questions might occur to you. Is the setting fantastical but realistic—or is it surreal? What kind of cause-and-effect might exist here? What are the creatures lying dead on the ground? Is the city fleeing? Is it in the midst of being destroyed? Construct a reasonable rationale for the setting of this image that might lead to story, even if it uses the logic of dream.

it not because she immerses you in details about hippogriffs, but because she knows that showing how the wing flexes from the torso and how the creature lifts off from the ground will convince the reader. Even a character passing through a marketplace in a fantasy setting may provide an opportunity to position your world in relation to the real world. Thus, writing "the marketplace was full of people and stalls selling clothes and food" might not be your best option.

- The setting ***impacts the characters' lives*** in surprising and interesting ways. The more the **present and past** of a place complicate the lives of characters and make things more difficult, creating obstacles, the more character and setting will seem to exist together rather than apart. Alasdair Gray's *Lanark* would be a vastly different novel if the fantastical life of the titular character were not bound by the constraints of Scottish history and culture, including interference, to put it mildly, by the British.

Good examples include The Jerusalem Quartet by Edward Whittemore and *Mother London* by Michael Moorcock.

- A certain ***depth and width*** is expressed consistently across chapters or stories. Whether you are writing about the real world or an imaginary one, the reader may expect some sense of the setting having dimensions and weight—and that, as a result, actions will have consequences dictated by the particulars of the setting. This sense is sometimes conveyed by what is not on the page. If you write a setting across several stories or novels, the ghosts of what readers *don't see* still

What Everyone Knows by Catherynne M. Valente

Catherynne M. Valente is a New York Times *bestselling author of fantasy and science-fiction novels, short stories, and poetry. Her full-length novels include* Yume no Hon: The Book of Dreams, The Grass-Cutting Sword, The Orphan's Tales, Palimpsest, *and* The Girl Who Circumnavigated Fairyland in a Ship of Her Own Making.

As a sort of freelance folklorist, I am enormously interested in the stories cultures tell about themselves. In genre fiction, this is called worldbuilding.

Any piece of history or genealogy or backstory that might fill in a fictional world is a story that world tells to itself about itself. It's not necessarily fact. For example, a lot of people love medieval settings *in part* because they got the idea that it was a paradise for strong white men. Women had no power, everyone had the same religion, the West was the prime cultural force in the world, gays were on the Extreme Down Low, and everyone who mattered was a warrior poet. The world was your Ren faire!

This is a story Western post-Renaissance culture tells about itself to itself. It is not fact. Any list of facts about medieval times would have to include Eleanor of Aquitaine, Margery Kempe, Julian of Norwich, Empress Theodora, Anna Comnenus, Joan of Arc, the flowering of Islamic culture, Byzantine culture, China, India, Kievan Rus, and the Great Schism, all of which fly in the face of that picture.

But the reasons for telling a particular story about the medieval world are very revealing and have a lot to do with the Renaissance's Crisis of Needing to Be the Awesomest. They always are. And when I think about my own fictional cultures and worlds, one of the things I consider is who is telling the story of *this* history I am choosing to side with in my narrative, telling it to whom, and why.

There's a shorthand to this. To me, the most interesting question, *whether the answers are true or not*, about a culture is: W*hat does everyone know?*

For example, in America, everyone "knows" we're the best. Everyone knows childhood is a time of innocence and fun. Everyone knows killing people is bad. Everyone knows the economy will get better. Everyone knows what a real family looks like. Everyone knows motherhood is wonderful. In conservative culture, everyone knows life was better in the fifties. In liberal culture, everyone knows the 1960s were where it was at. Everyone knows what the Dark Ages were like.

A quick way of figuring out whether something falls into the cognitive hole of What Everyone Knows? Ask yourself what statement would get the most outcry within a given (large or small) group. What you cannot say in that group, even if you think it. The things you can say, which would cause only responses of *Agreed!*: That's What Everyone Knows.

The thing about What Everyone Knows is, it's only sometimes factual—I hesitate to say "almost never," but that's probably closer. But it's

true, in the sense that people comport their lives according to their belief in it, teach it to others, and get upset when What Some Other Group Knows comes into conflict with it. Most stories, at their core, involve someone finding out that What Everyone Knows is or is not true, and what they do with that information.

So when writing, it pays to ask yourself What Everyone in This Story Knows. Buggers are the enemy. Winter is coming. The Doctor will save us. There is nothing unusual about our family. Magic is/isn't real. The King/Queen is bad/good. You can/can't fight the Man. They only come out at night.

In fact, when you don't ask this question explicitly, you fall into communicating What You Know as though it's What Everyone Knows. Women aren't as good as men. There is such a thing as a rightful ruler. Beautiful people are better than ugly people, or vice versa. Technology is always good, or always bad. God is real or God is dead, humanity is especially good or especially crap, people with British or Russian or Arab accents are automatically suspicious, one gender expressing traits of another is gross or funny or punishable, robots will destroy us or robots will save us. And even from this list you can probably tell a little of What I Know, which may or may not jibe with What You Know. We all communicate the stories of our culture—whether that culture is a country, a planet, a family, or a fandom—in most of the things that we say and do. That is why folklore is awesome and necessary for understanding human groups.

can register with the audience. For example, a reader could conceivably enter China Miéville's Bas-Lag fantasy setting at any point in the trilogy and still feel the weight of certain prior events in the reactions and actions of the characters.

- The setting both ***mirrors our real world and deviates from it*** in interesting ways, with any real influences fully "cooked" and assimilated in the process. By "cooking," I mean that any real-world context has been so recontextualized and rethought that the source material is largely unrecognizable. Once your setting has some built-in complexity, further cooking becomes much easier. There is sufficient existing context to soak up new information or details without the result seeming **derivative**. For example, in my Ambergris novel *Finch*, occupiers of the city demolish existing industrial buildings to build a prison camp; this is a direct transference of the details of Israeli settlements in the West Bank.

Similarly, that dragon should also not be a pale imitation of Smaug from Tolkien's *The Hobbit*, unless such an allusion is your intent.

- The setting ***is in some way personal*** to you, the writer. Fantasy can become too symbolic or stylized to allow for the creation of a living, breathing story. One way to combat this effect is to focus on what makes setting meaningful to you. A fantasist like Angela Carter, for example, is on record as having avoided stagnation first through integrating into her work the feminist ideals that helped define her sense of self, and by slowly changing from a more stylized approach to worldbuilding to a more realistic one. Another good example is Tamas Dobozy and

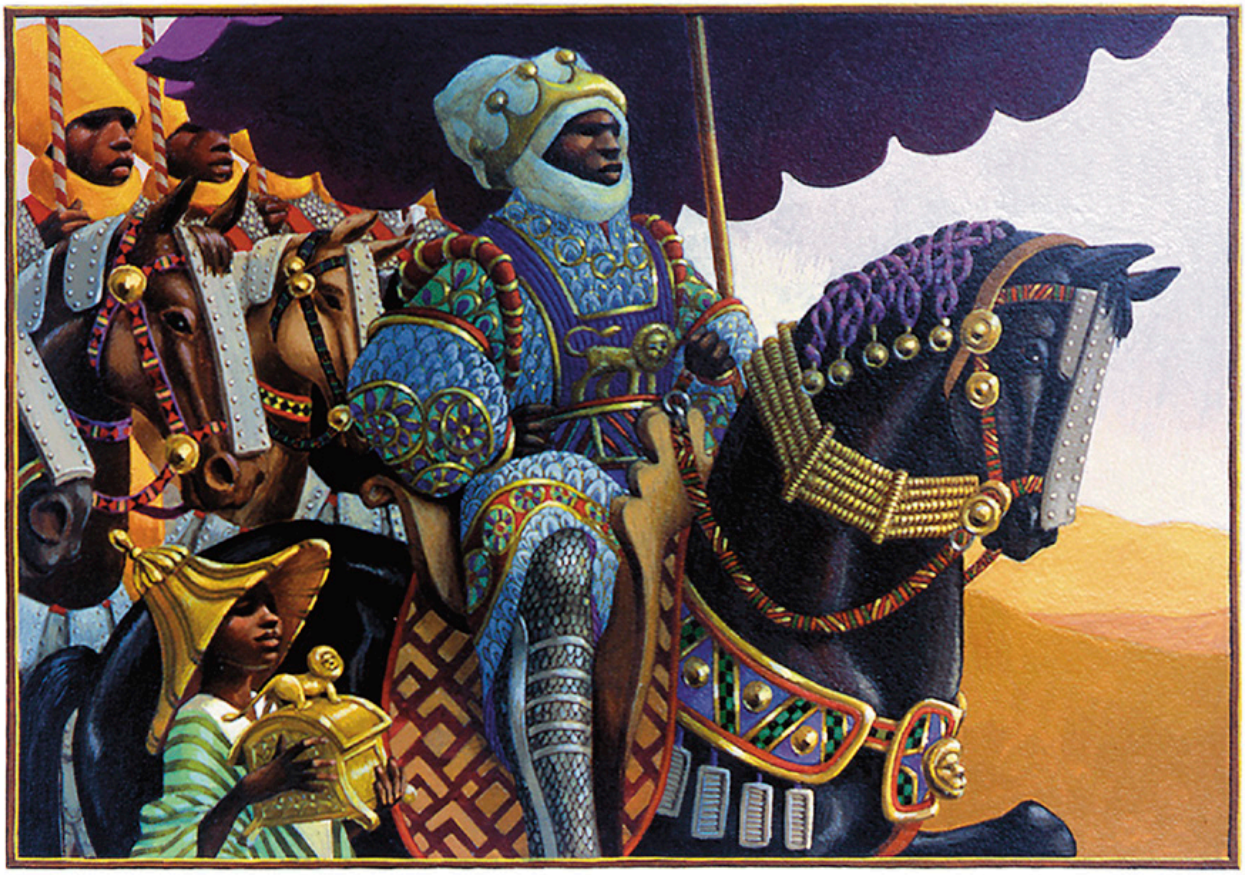
his collection *Siege 13,* which gains real power from drawing on the autobiographical details of his upbringing as the son of Hungarian immigrants. The world created evokes the events of World War II, but in a deeply personal way.

- The setting has ***sufficient mystery and unexplored vistas***. Readers like to know certain facts about a setting, to have an anchor, but to know everything is somehow disappointing. The unknown world provides a sense of adventure and possible discovery. There is also something limiting to you, the writer, in adding too much. Sometimes the writer needs space in a setting to let the imagination work its magic. Sometimes you will regret having filled in too much because your next story or novel set in the same place requires contradicting what you've already set out. More than one heroic fantasy novelist has quietly had a map in an early novel redrawn to accommodate some new inspiration.

- The setting exhibits varying levels of ***consistent inconsistency***. Much like the individual people who live there, the real world is layered and complex. In a city like London modern buildings exist next to those from the 1600s, with St. Paul's Cathedral right next to a skyscraper. Similarly, you might in some regions of the world see a farmer using oxen to plow his field while he talks on a cell phone. Places and cultures change over time, and often the past walks side by side with the present. Be careful not to reduce your worldview down to something monolithic that ignores this fact, or you may experience a slow creep toward other generalities (and banalities).

- The setting reflects that ***we live in a multicultural world***. Whether you read these words sitting in New York City or Istanbul or Brussels, you encounter people different from you every day. Ethnic, religious, cultural, class, and language diversity exists everywhere, to some extent. You can profitably explore a homogenous culture, but one particular failure of worldbuilding in fantasy

The Casa Batlló, Barcelona, designed by Antoni Gaudí. Real-world places can often be as fantastical or surreal as imaginary ones. Architecture can convey the architect's sense of narrative, suggesting that fantastical tales about setting don't arise from writers alone.



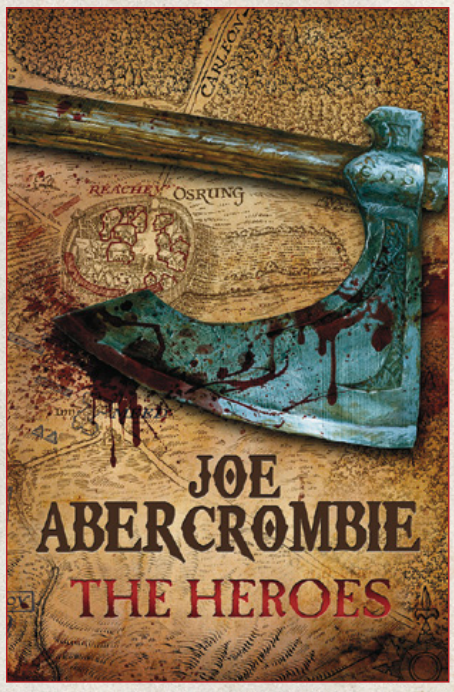
"Mansa Musa" by Leo and Diane Dillon (2001). What are the cultural underpinnings of your setting? What defaults do you gravitate toward—and might there be more interesting approaches?

has been an *unthinking* homogeneity that doesn't exist in real life—for example, some watered-down version of a medieval feudal system applied across not just one society but an entire planet. Another good example is an alien society with members who have more or less the same personality and who express at most one or two beliefs. As Sedia notes, "Individuals can be quite different from each other, and can be at odds with dominant cultural values. Try to avoid one of anything: a single religion, a single ethnicity, a single country populated by a single 'race,' etc. Common stereotypes include Holy Simple People, Warlike People, Honor-Obsessed People, Hive Minds, Crazy Arab-Like People, Industrious People, Artsy People, and Amazon Women. Having such stereotypes tends to have a trickle-down effect on other aspects of your worldbuilding; for example, you make up customs that don't make any logical sense for the culture in question."

- Certain objects within the narrative are acting as ***extended, literalized metaphors*** supporting the reality of the setting. These objects function on the surface of story as a physical, real thing, bringing with them the context of the setting's history. But they also bring some resonance from the real world. For example, in my fantasy city of Ambergris fungal bullets are edible when spent, and during times of war starving survivors often dig them out of bodies. The real-world equivalent is the fact that food packets and bombs dropped on Afghanistan by U.S. forces were roughly the same size and color, causing tragic confusions.

SETTING ON METAPHOR

The Role of Maps in Narrative: "The Heroes" by Joe Abercrombie



New York Times *bestseller Joe Abercrombie studied psychology at Manchester University and worked as a freelance film editor for a decade. His first book,* The Blade Itself *(2006), was followed by two other books in The First Law trilogy. Several books set in the same world have followed, including* The Heroes *and* Red Country.

The Heroes is unusual for an epic fantasy book, in that it's the story of a single battle, a good ninety percent of it taking place in one valley and in a compressed time period. Landscape is always important, but vitally so in a battle, where wrinkles of terrain are going to have a profound impact on the tactics, the movement, the development of the battle in general, and, as a result, the stories of the characters caught up in it. In a battle, features as innocuous as a hill, a stream, or a ditch can become fearsome weapons or terrifying obstacles. A good map, therefore, was absolutely central to the writing of this book.

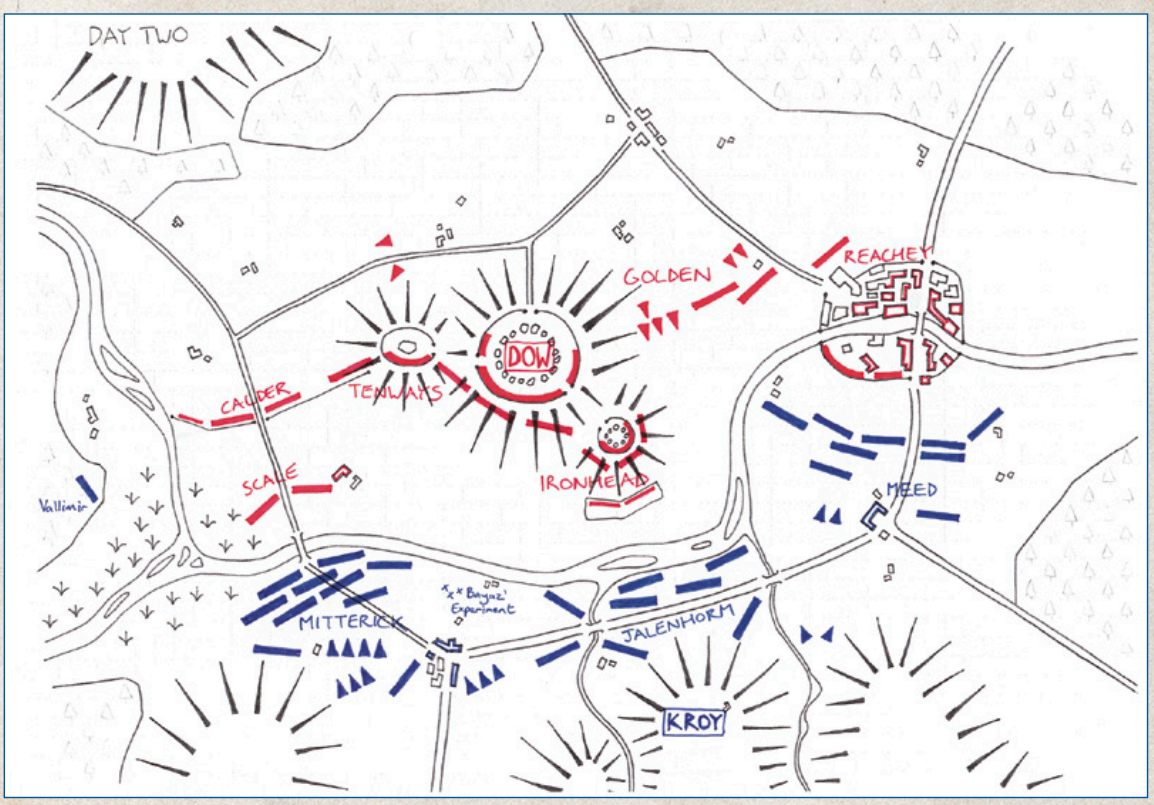
The terrain for *The Heroes* developed along with the plotting—the landscape subordinate to what I wanted to do with the armies and the characters, the scenes and scenarios I wanted to cover—but once I knew who my central characters were going to be and had a good idea of how the battle would develop over the course of three days—and the map therefore drawn up—the shape of the ground, the distances, the sight lines, and the physical obstacles started to influence the detail of the way certain scenes would develop. Ground and story twist and flex along with each other during the writing.

I started with a central hill that would dominate the valley—high ground that could change hands several times—and I put some standing stones on top called the Heroes, which tied in nicely with my central theme. I wanted the scale of the battle to steadily build as more units arrived, going from a squad-size skirmish to full engagement, but I also wanted to focus the action so that I could bring my characters together in a few key places for the biggest dramatic payoff (one would hope). So I split the battlefield with a river and gave it three practicable crossings—two bridges and some larger fords overlooked by the central hill.

Conscious that an entire book covering one battle in one unremarkable valley runs the risk of becoming—ahem—monotonous, I was very keen to provide as much variety in the terrain as I possibly could. The goal was to include a rich assortment of settings and types of action to lend the story more texture and interest. So I put in forests and orchards where units could surprise and be surprised, open fields suitable for charges, a town where desperate and confusing urban warfare could happen, inns and villages at key junctions where troops would be staged and the injured nursed, as well as bogs, hedges, and walls. I'd shift or trim the exact shapes and positions according to the way I wanted a scene to develop.


THE VALLEY OF OSRUNG
YAWS
Holcum Farm
Bear Farm
USTRED
Skarling's Finger
THE HEROES
Clail Farm
Moss Beck
Wall
Clail's
Stole Farm
Old Bridge
Adwein
Trickgill
Lock Fell
ULFERTH

Map for Heroes by Dave Senior.



Map sketch by Joe Abercrombie.

One of the key choke points was the Old Bridge, over on the west side of the map, a narrow crossing of the swift-flowing river and the perfect place for a desperate hand-to-hand fight, crushed in and at close quarters. The Union, coming from the south, desperately needs to capture the bridge from the Northmen. Disgraced swordsman Bremer dan Gorst is keen to win glory by involving himself in the fight, and he plays a key role in the midst of the action. Professional coward Prince Calder, on the other side, watches the combat develop from behind the relative safety of Clail's Wall to the north of the bridge. Veteran Curnden Craw is able to see how this engagement fits into the overall development of the battle from a vantage point on top of the Heroes. Positioned beside the overall commander of the Northmen, Craw is frustrated at being unable to take part himself. Other characters, downstream from the bridge, are able to see the corpses from both sides floating past.

The following day, the open fields between the Old Bridge and Clail's Wall become the perfect ground for a vainglorious cavalry charge. Thinking up some way to defeat that charge is the key moment in Prince Calder's development from coward to, if not hero, then not *quite* coward. Terrain creates event, which bears on character.

Maps are something of a staple at the start of epic fantasies, but with *The Heroes* we included four additional maps throughout the book, showing the positions of the opposing armies at the start of each day's fighting—the sort of thing that's perhaps more familiar in military history than in fantasy.

Maps were vitally important to me in making the action feel precise and convincing and the story authentic. Maps also give the reader a quick overview of what is a complicated and potentially confusing situation. But I think the maps in *The Heroes* further add a sense of weight and reality: a sense of the story being an invented history, and one that is concrete and plausible. Generally speaking, I want things to feel *real*. Maps, used carefully, can help you create that sense.

The operational reality of oppressed groups is not always kept alive deliberately: it may survive in children's rhymes or a way of cutting cucumbers. These memories exist in the body. They lie in wait, like seeds. — **Sofia Samatar**

- The setting allows for ***several different operational realities***, which may clash with one another. An operational reality is often based on a certain idea or ideology and leads to a group or individual having a particular objective. Any time one operational reality does not have enough points of commonality with another, issues arise. For example, any country that has been conquered or reconquered and which contains many ethnicities may display this effect. These rifts between the visions of the past and present automatically create conflict, which often expresses itself through vastly differing stories about the same events. Especially in an urban context, operational realities may also be expressed through physical alterations to a setting. These changes are both literal and figurative—and they often reflect conscious decisions by groups of people that favor their vision of a place over another group's vision; a kind of revision or rewriting of history by which people intend to reclaim the future.

- As a result of this last point, ***collective and individual memory*** plays an active role. For example, in areas of the world where native tribes have been displaced, the operational reality held on to by those peoples may be largely invisible because, beyond the few markers left in the city that explicitly signify their original claim to the place, their vision exists mostly in their minds. It is kept alive by memory and its expression in ritual and written records, and possibly by the very act of continuing to speak, write, and read in their own languages. Thus, memory can be not just informational or a recollection of events—nor is it just there to add depth to character or to provide inert, character-based exposition. Instead, it is often a very proactive act of defiance or survival.

- Several crucial ***miscommunications*** and moments of ***imperfect comprehension*** occur. This point speaks to the way different operational realities are not always compatible because of cultural, religious, or technological differences. For example, in the police station in my novel *Finch*, the new conquerors of the city have supplemented telephones with "memory holes," which are the ends of living pneumatic tubes leading to the underground. The conquerors find this method of communication ordinary, standard, nonthreatening—it is a nonissue. But to the humans who have to use these enhancements, the experience is horrific and alien, causing extreme discomfort. Why are such moments important? When in fiction we match up too perfectly the meeting points between cultures or differing worldviews, we make assumptions that can degrade the quality of our fiction—and we miss opportunities for further complexity. The kind of complexity that organically creates conflict, characterization, and more specificity of detail. Said another way, a seamless landscape and a seamless harmony of ideas intertwined as the backdrop to the events in a novel can be a sign that not enough thought has been put into the elements of the setting/milieu. Surely if there is conflict in the foreground, between characters, then it is possible that elements of the setting may also be in conflict in some way?

"Ice Land" by Sam Van Olffen. A harsh physical environment can affect your story and your characters. It can also normalize what someone else might find extreme.

In considering some of these ideas, it may seem as if research is clearly required. But your ideas and approach may not require it. Rhys Hughes writes fantasy deeply indebted to the Welsh countryside and mythos, interpreted through his own surreal sensibilities, and the results have a wonderful sense of place, without a need for research. If he wasn't Welsh or wrote in a more realistic vein, Hughes might indeed need to look up more than a few things. Conversely, many of my stories are heavily influenced by study of Byzantine, Venetian, Sicilian, British, and Southeast Asian history, along with my own experiences living overseas. Remember, too, that research often reveals that the real world is a very strange place, even if we don't always realize it. Among the facts that have stuck in my mind are a civil war in Byzantium between two rival theater groups and the fact that the Visigoths wove their leaders' cloaks from field mouse pelts.

In addition, the natural emphasis on cities in fantasy and other forms of fiction should not blind you to the fact that ***all settings can be complex.*** Rural and wilderness areas are not simpler places—they may simply exhibit a different kind of richness. "Rural" equals "less sophisticated" is just one of the more unfortunate clichés about setting. As for wilderness, in our world it, too, is shaped by both human hands and the human gaze. Just the data on the transfer of biodiversity caused by Christopher Columbus's trips to the New World proves the truth of this, but so, too, will any chapter in Simon Schama's *Landscape and Memory*. Certainly, this is true in the St. Marks Wildlife Refuge, where I often hike. The trail I take, which inspired my novel *Annihilation*, was once used by early Native Americans, then by the Spanish and other colonizers, and then by Seminole Indians, before becoming part of our modern landscape. That's a lot of history for a pristine wilderness.

WEB
WILDERNESS SETTINGS

Not only can all settings be complex, but the special ability that fantasy and science fiction have to extrapolate shouldn't be squandered on low-concept ideas if you can help

The hiking trail at the St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge in North Florida. Although this appears to be a "natural" setting, it has a long and complex human history.

it. For example, at a French SF convention, Utopiales, I was on a panel where we discussed the possibility of breaking down a redwood tree's ecosystem into its component parts and using that as a guide for how to build an environmentally friendly city, one that might look from the outside almost exactly like a forest. Something similar should be happening in terms of innovation, where possible. Innovations can be world-spanning or something small that also provides the perfect detail—the key to your setting.

Dangers and Opportunities

Especially in a fantastical context, your worldbuilding is susceptible to three specific problems, which, ironically enough, can also be strengths in the right context.

- ***Setting devours the characters.*** If the writer doesn't sufficiently differentiate the characters from the setting, then the setting can devour the characters. The details of the setting can push the characters aside or seem to make the characters and their actions less important. Many real-world **environments** are so harsh or impose such rules or restrictions on people that such a scenario is believable. Or, the point of the story is to explore or report back on a strange place. But in cases where this isn't meant to happen, this situation parallels going to a concert where the sound mix is off and the singer's voice is drowned out by the guitar and drums.

Frank Herbert's *The Dosadi Experiment* exemplifies this approach, in its story of people trying to survive in a fragile, hostile environment.

- ***Fantastical talismans dominate other details.*** This approach puts the focus on some living element of the fantasy setting and elevates it to the level of character,

OPPOSITE
"A Dream of Apples" by Charles Vess (1999). The Green Man myth—a face made of leaves—has a rich history in world cultures. The motif is often used to mean rebirth, renaissance, or to symbolize Nature. The Green Man appears in many fantasy novels.

deemphasizing the rest of the setting. The dragon is described well, and we believe that it might fly, but we're not quite as sure about anything else, including the village the dragon just burned down. The backdrop is all a bit hazy, or a bit too familiar, because, in focusing on the fantastical talisman, the writer has had to fill in the rest hastily. The dragon may be so freighted with all the appropriate and expected tropes of its species that it doesn't really fly in the sense of a creature with enough individuality to make choices for itself, including torching villages, and so the clichéd dragon literally drags down the rest of the story.

Perhaps the writer has some expectation that conjuring up the dragon might be enough, as it takes flight with all of the appropriate dragon tropes both lifting it up and weighing it down. But in extreme cases, the backdrop almost disappears because these talismans usurp the function of setting. For example, China Miéville's *Un Lun Dun* features anthropomorphized trash cans, smog, and other monsters that would normally be used as details of the city setting. Instead, as literalized metaphors that break away from the backdrop, they leave precious little setting in place. As a result, parts of the novel almost seem to be acted out in front of a blank wall.

- ***Detail overwhelms other elements.*** "Worldbuilding" with a capital "W" presents an engorged mass accumulation of detail with enough narrative authority to out-fire-breathe a dragon. This immersive level of detail may be the primary reason why a particular type of reader picks up a novel: They want all of it. But the approach often disguises the fact that the reader is being presented with an encyclopedia of facts rather than being shown the complex ways in which fact is open to interpretation and how point of view has a huge impact on what is visible or invisible in a story. It may also simply reflect a lack of ability on your part to distinguish an important detail from an unimportant detail.

As indicated, each of these approaches can work, as long as they don't represent a failure of control or thought. So much depends on the proper execution of your intent. Leena Krohn's *Tainaron: Mail from Another City* largely defines its setting through descriptions of the giant talking insects that inhabit the titular city, while Tolkien's *The Silmarillion* privileges places over people, and epic fantasist Steve Erickson's Malazan series sometimes uses the encyclopedia approach to worldbuilding.

But as writer and teacher Matthew Cheney notes, "The reader who loves Tom Clancy novels because of their obsessive levels of detail doesn't want Tom Clancy to be a 'better' writer any more than those of us who prefer *Anna Karenina* to *Patriot Games* would have really wanted Tolstoy to cut any of the passages about harvesting. I also hear there are people who like the whaling chapters of *Moby-Dick*. But I'd rather read another hundred pages of Tolstoy on farming—in part because the farming in Tolstoy also builds the character of Levin in my mind, and gives me information about nineteenth-century Russia, which interests me, and that also connects to the overall structure of *Anna Karenina*."

On the Synthesis of Minor but Noteworthy Universes by Charles Yu

Charles Yu is the author of the novel How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe*, as well as the story collections* Third Class Superhero *and* Sorry Please Thank You*. His writing has appeared in* The New York Times Book Review*,* Slate*, and* Oxford American*. He lives in Santa Monica with his family.*

Step 1: Fabrication

I've only ever made one universe, to date. I hope to make a few more in whatever time I have left, but who knows? There's a lot of luck involved.

The one I did make, called Minor Universe 31, is somewhere between a shoe box and an aquarium, in terms of size. You can go visit it, and the inhabitants there are still in existence, still moving around inside. I don't want to take it apart because, well, I am terrible at anything involving technology. I can barely change the batteries on my remote control without screwing something up. My worst nightmare is that I pop the lid off the back of MU-31 and start pulling wires out to get a better look, and then when I go to put everything back in the box, it doesn't fit anymore . . . and on top of that, I didn't learn anything. I think that's the thing about making a universe: Even if you're the one who built it, you don't necessarily know how it works.

So I don't have a whole lot of useful knowledge in terms of how to build one. Put four walls up. Voilà? Maybe. And then, if you're so inclined, punch out one of the four walls, and leave it open like that.

I can, however, shed some light on how *not* to fabricate a universe. I look around my workshop (which is embarrassingly messy), and what I see are lots of broken prototypes. Partial universes, lots of them, ranging from wire-frame structures, which are nearly complete with texture and even detail, all the way down to mere fragments, little scraps that are not much more than a few toothpicks bound together by some conceptual rubber bands. (If you haven't seen these, they're neat—although working with them can be tricky, since they often snap back in your face, which is quite painful.) These starts all have one thing in common: They're empty shells. Inert. Hollow, brittle, not structurally sound. These are contraptions without any power source. And it goes without saying (although I guess I'm saying it): Even the best-looking chassis is useless without an engine.

I started all of these with the idea of top-down engineering. I could build a universe and then put people in it. I know some people can do this. I can't. Which leads me to…

Step 2: Biochemistry

So now I don't go into that part of the lab much anymore. At least not at the beginning. Okay, maybe I still do. What can I say? Old habits.

But when I am exercising self-control and discipline, I don't go in there. Not until I have something living. The plan: Make something vital, something alive, and then worry about the housing. Grow something, then give it a place to live, not the other way around.

Instead of constructing a shoe-box reality, you can grow one. In a fish tank. Which is what I did

with Minor Universe 31. This is the one time I've ever gotten a novel-size universe working, so I can speak only from my unique experience, but with that disclaimer, here are a few things I learned:

1. Some of the big-box stores (Trauma Depot, Orchard Hardware, and Experiential Supplies) sell gallon jugs (or even big, industrial, five-gallon drums) of homogenized life experience. Don't use that stuff. You have to home brew. Seriously. It's a pain, but you have to do it. It's tempting to go for a premade mix of standardized ingredients, for a couple of reasons: You know people have a taste for it, and, in terms of sheer volume, it's nice not to have to cook up so much of your own raw material. You can just imagine how quick and easy and good it might feel to buy a few gallons, unscrew the caps, and glug the stuff into your universe tank, two bottles at a time, filling it up really fast.

But what goes for pastries goes for universes, too. (Note: I don't know anything about pastries.) What you get out can only be as good as what you put in. So use your own stuff. You'll know it best: its idiosyncrasies, its material properties, the little quirks of how it changes under heat and pressure.

2. While we're on the topic of homogenization, I would like to add: Don't do it. Leave things lumpy. People want to know how the protagonist's father's dress socks looked against his pale white shins. People want to know the titles of the strange and eclectic books lining the walls of his study. People want to know the sounds he made while snoring, how he looked while concentrating, the way his glasses pinched the bridge of his nose, leaving what appeared to be uncomfortable-looking ovals of purple and red discolored skin when he took those glasses off at the end of a long day. Even if those lumps make the mixture less smooth, less pretty, even if you don't quite know what to do with them, even if they don't figure into your chemistry—they don't have a place in the reaction equations—leave them there. Leave the impurities in there.

3. Volatility is not necessarily a problem. Let stuff explode.

4. Insolubility is not necessarily a problem. Not everything has to mix together well. Sometimes two substances that don't react can still produce some interesting boundary layers.

5. Concentration is key. Reagents, enzymes, catalysts. Not everything goes in at a 1:1 ratio. Some substances should only be introduced in trace quantities. You need just enough to get things going.

6. It's not just chemistry, it's biochemistry. The bio part comes from you. You need primer. Genetic material. DNA to start the polymerase chain reaction. At a minimum, a healthy dose of blood. For good measure, consider wringing out a washcloth full of tears. Preferably tears of sadness, although joy tears will do in a pinch.

And, if you can stomach it, I recommend ripping off a piece of your own flesh and dropping it into the beaker. Smell the vapors, enjoy the fizz. Watch yourself, a piece of your self, disappear in the solvent of your own concoction.

Step 3: Making Sure It's Plugged In

This step is easy to forget. I don't know what this means; I lost track (and control) of this metaphor a couple of pages ago. Basically, the only place you can plug in your universe is into your heart. No, that's not true. Any heart will do. The reader's heart is probably a good idea. Yes, that's it. Plug your universal fish tank, the one with your life material, enzymes, and a piece of your own flesh, take the plug in the back and jam it into someone's heart, and the thing should run. If not, don't despair. Actually, it's okay to despair. As long as you try again. ❧

"Bird-Leaf" by Ivica Stevanovic, based on Brian Evenson's anecdote below. Sometimes the tricks the mind plays on a person contribute to a more complex view of the world.

The Strangeness of the World

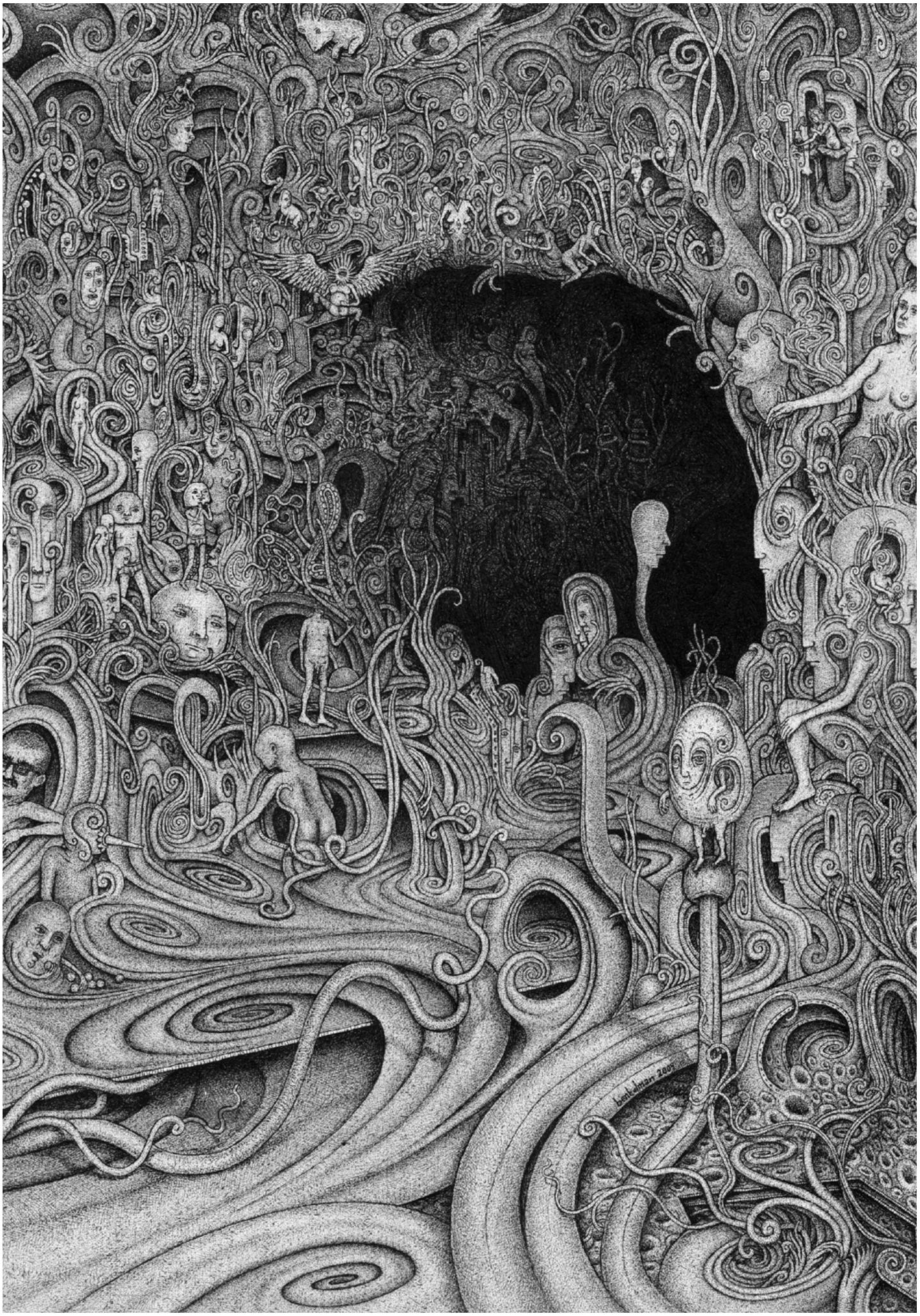
Especially when creating imaginary worlds, it is easy to think strictly in terms of making the unfamiliar familiar. The reader must have an understanding of the setting that allows them to enjoy your story or novel. But in describing your setting, you may want to be careful not to tamper with an essential strangeness or inexplicable quality that we often find in the real world. You control the extent of what you make known and what you keep mysterious. This idea goes beyond the idea of "unexplored vistas."

As Caitlín R. Kiernan wisely notes, "a single mystery is worth innumerable solutions." This idea appeals to many writers; sometimes it's even the point of the writing. Brian Evenson, for example, thinks that his fiction "is partly about the impossibility of knowing anything for certain, about our inability to eliminate doubt from our notion of the world. That's something built into perception in that perception is always about interpretation. What we tend to do is interact less with the world and more with a representation of the world we create in our minds." Within this context, Evenson notes how often "we misperceive things." For example, he remembers once "watching a bird move across a parking lot in what I felt was an exceptionally strange way and wondering if it was injured . . . until I got close enough to realize it was not a bird at all, but a leaf that my mind had decided was a bird and had worked very hard to make a bird, constructing a whole narrative to justify a misperception."

OPPOSITE
"Hole" by Ben Tolman (2009). The normal rules of logic and perception do not apply to surreal or dreamlike approaches to setting.

Evenson had a hard time not feeling that "a sort of sleight-of-hand trick had been performed, that there had been a bird out there before and that something, possibly malicious, had substituted a leaf for it."

"I'd like to think that unknowability is the dynamo at the center of it all," Stephen Graham Jones admits. "The improbability engine of whatever that is that generates



all the power. I mean, I don't see any other reason to write, other than that you're trying to make the world make sense. . . . But built into that is that the world is fundamentally a mystery. Inexplicable. Even as you try to explain it."

John Crowley also believes it is a "central problem and central opportunity in creating work that has fantasy or the fantastic at its heart":

> The world, this one, *is* inexplicable, and realistic novels can only be great and large-hearted and convincing if that inexplicability is featured: only if—even if there is a fixed and resolved plot—that inexplicability convincingly surrounds the characters and action. That beautiful dialogue at the end of *Ulysses* where Bloom and Stephen are trying to break into Bloom's house, a dialogue that keeps insisting on rational answers to practical questions but in fact stands for the wondrous inexhaustibility of the world.

For the great weird writer Thomas Ligotti, meanwhile, "Strangeness is a perspective. It's not immanent in anything. If you read a book in which everything is at odds with the commonplace world you believe you live in, the book has to refer over and over to the things in that commonplace world or everything in the book will begin to seem completely familiar. This is a truism for fantastic writers. First they have to establish the commonplace rules of their stories, and then they can introduce violations of that invented commonplace world." But Ligotti contends that "most fantastic and supernatural horror stories **aren't written to create a sense of the strange**. They're written to introduce a threat to the characters in the story, which soon becomes much like any other threat—a wild animal or a murderer, for instance." It helps, then, "to sustain a sense of strangeness if the story sticks close to the banal, or what we think is the banal."

Further discussion of this topic can be found in Daniel Ableev's unpublished interview with Ligotti. All Ligotti quotes here are from Ableev's interview.

One great example of strangeness in worldbuilding occurs in Ligotti's story "The Clown Puppet." The story's narrator works the night shift at a pharmacy and has "a

certain perspective on the world that leads him to call everything nonsensical. That perspective lends a bit of strangeness to the story." Ligotti's thoughts about "The Clown Puppet" emphasize that strangeness can be built in fiction through small, mundane details: "The narrator calls the pharmacy where he's working a 'medicine shop,' which is not how such an establishment is usually referred to. Yet this nomenclature is not so unconventional that one can question it. There are no people walking about outside who might serve as customers. There's nothing wholly unusual about that, but it makes the narrator's presence behind the counter of the medicine shop, while the owner of the shop is snoring in his apartment above the shop, seem somewhat questionable. What time is it? Is the narrator working in the middle of the night?"

But Ligotti also contends that it's not just what's included in a story that makes the worldview strange—it's also what's missing. "In 'The Clown Puppet' there are almost no touchstones in the narrative to what the reader knows as 'real life.' So a sort of baseline of strangeness has been established that sets the stage for the title creature of the story, which exists at a higher level of strangeness and thereby takes the story into another realm. But while the narrator does not welcome the visits he receives from the clown puppet, he resents them more than he actually fears them, which is a strange perspective to have and one that makes the meaning and status of the clown puppet entirely mysterious."

As Crowley acknowledges, though, fiction tends to strive toward at least explication of a problem or situation—a quest, a crime, a treasure, a mystery. "So how then can I as a writer draw that inexplicability into my fantastic fiction? In part it's through allegory: the soluble mystery stands for the insoluble. For me, too, it tends to [occur through] characters who feel themselves to be in a world that they can't grasp in its essence, even if readers think *they* can."

The places and spaces in which story occurs are not inert or merely backdrops to action—they have energy, motion, and create certain effects depending on your approach. Thus, worldbuilding is not just about creating colorful stages for your characters—worldbuilding can be part of what is taking place. In thinking about worldbuilding as an entry point into story, remember these ideas:

OPPOSITE
"R'lyeh" (1999) by John Coulthart, an attempt to present H. P. Lovecraft's world in a photo-realist manner.

OVERLEAF
The Dreamlands of H. P. Lovecraft mapped by Jason Thompson (2011). Thompson says of the piece, ". . . it includes all the place-names mentioned in 'The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath,' 'The Doom That Came to Sarnath,' 'The White Ship,' 'The Cats of Ulthar,' 'The Other Gods,' and all of Lovecraft's even marginally dream-based stories and poetry. In addition, it shows regions from the work of Gary Myers, Lord Dunsany, and a few other sources that feel like they would be at home in the collective 'realm of wisdom that many know.'"


THE LANDS OF DREAM
TO KADATH
ZOBNA
THE GIANT QUARRY
LOMAR
SARKIS
KAAR
URG
INGANOK
NORTHERN MARSHES
YANN
SERANNIAN
JAREN
CERENARIAN SEA
THE ROCK
OGROTHAN
MT. ARAN
TANARIAN HILLS
CELEPHAÏS
OPHIR
VALLEY OF NARTHOS
THRAN
KLED
THE GARDEN LANDS
KIRAN
HLANITH
LHOSK
ENCHANTED WOOD
MT. LERION
MT. SIDRAK
OOTH-NARGAI
MT. HATHEG-KLA
THE STONY DESERT
ULTHAR
NIR
HATHEG
CARCASSONNE
SARRUB
BNAZIC DESERT
MT. THURAI
LATGOZ
OONAI
MEROE
PARG
DYLATH-LEEN
THE SUNKEN CITY
ORIAB
BAHARNA
MT. NGRANEK
KHEM
TO THE BASALT PILLARS OF THE WEST
SONA NYL
SOUTHERN SEA
THETH
XURA
THALARION
ZAR
TOR
MAPPAMVNDI SOMNIORVM EX LIBRIS LOVECRAFT DVNSANY MYERS ALLIS
HESPERIA
THE ROUND COTTAGES
CITY OF THE MOON-BEASTS


THE SPHERES
VEGA
POLARIS
HYADES
THOG
MAR
ALGOL
YADDITH
ZIMIAMVIA
YANUS
YUGGOTH
CYTHARION
TELOE
SHAGGAI
ARINURIAN STREAMS
ASTARTE
ALFIAN
XOTHRANCE
GARDENS OF YIN
THE GOLDEN VALLEY
ZAKARION
THE GREEN MEADOWS
THE CATARACT
NARATH
HOUSE OF THE GHOLES
THORABON
ILEK-VAD
OCTAVIA
THE SUNKEN CROWN
LENG
YIAN-HO
TWILIGHT SEA
OXUHAHN
HAZUTH-KLEG
PERINTHIA
ZULAN-THEK
HILLS OF HAP
SETHMOORA
KOKOL
THIBET
UTNAR VEHI
PALACE OF THE NILEAH
THE EASTERN DESERT
POOL OF NIGHT
GAK
CITY-NOT-WELL-TO-ENTER
BEERSHEBA
ARVLE WOODLEY
POLTARREES
ARIZIM
MONDATH
TOLDEES
RIVER ORIATHON
ISLES OF NARIEL
ASAGEHON
TSOL
IREM
KADATHERON
THE LAKE OF SARNATH
IB
PUNGAR VEES
MIDDLE OCEAN
MTAL
MNAR
THRAA
TRUN
HILLS OF NOOR
NURI
LIRANIAN DESERT
THACE
ILARNEK
CHALDAEA
RINAR
DESPINA
THUL
EUDOXIA
THE NIGHT OCEAN
KRAGUA
DOTHUR
CYDATHRIA
SUNRISE SHORE
APHORAT
SMITH
CHASM OF NIS
RIVER THAN
LAND OF KING KYNARATHOLIS
CUPPAR-NOMBO
GOLTHOTH
ZAIS
RIVER KATHOS
CITY OF THE GUGS
VALE OF PNATH
THE NETHER PITS
PEAKS OF THOK
VAULTS OF ZIN
PNATH
RUINS OF UNUSUAL SIZE AND SHAPE
CRADLE OF IB
THE UNDERWORLD
JASON BRADLEY THOMPSON • MOCKMAN.COM

- Anchoring your fiction correctly in place, situation, and history enhances the emotional resonance.
- Landscape not invested with emotion or point of view is lifeless.
- The real world and personal experience feed into imaginary settings and are a vital part of worldbuilding.
- Approaches to setting and character should be multidirectional: organic and three-dimensional, with layers and depth.
- Throwaway settings are like throwaway characters: a missed opportunity.

"Mormeck Mountain" by Mo Ali (2011). Where does character end and setting begin? The distinction isn't always so clear-cut. This illustration for my novel-in-progress, *The Journals of Doctor Mormeck*, depicts the main character, Mormeck. He just happens to be a living mountain with a laboratory facility run by angels located on his "head."

Do Not Crash Do Not Burn

WORKSHOP

APPENDIX

LARP & Writing by Karin Tidbeck

George R. R. Martin on the Craft of Writing

Games & Storytelling by Will Hindmarch

Writing Exercises

Development of a Writer

LARP & WRITING

Karin Tidbeck

Swedish writer Karin Tidbeck is the author of the story collection Jagannath, *winner of the Crawford Award and a finalist for the James Tiptree Jr. Award. She has published short stories and poetry in Swedish since 2002, and in English since 2010. Her English publication history includes* Weird Tales, *Weirdfictionreview.com, NPR.org,* Shimmer Magazine, Unstuck Annual, *Tor.com,* Lightspeed Magazine, *and the anthology* Odd?. *Her first novel,* Amatka, *was released by Sweden's largest publisher in 2011.*

Loosely termed, LARP—live-action role-playing, or LARPing as I'll sometimes call it here—is the collaborative, improvised telling of a story where the participants physically act out their parts. This essay is written from the perspective of the LARP tradition

native to Sweden, Norway, Denmark, and Finland, also known as Nordic LARP. Also, this sort of role-playing has nothing to do with Dungeons & Dragons or hack 'n' slash and everything to do with character and storytelling.

A LARP can take just as many forms as there are types of story. A common stereotype is "hitting each other with rubber swords in someone's backyard," but it can also mean refurnishing the inside of a World War II submarine to be a spaceship or playing out a forty-eight-hour psychological drama in a "black box" theater with only duct tape on the floor to mark out rooms and furniture. Some LARPs are just for fun; others are artistic experiments or political statements. Some are created for educational purposes, such as an interactive method to teach history to high school students. Others are mixed-arts projects, like an improv version of *Hamlet*, where the audience gets to play the nobles in the royal court, and parts of the play are shown as film sequences.

At some LARPs you can go casually in and out of character; at others, going out of character in front of others is expressly forbidden. No matter what their level of ambition, though, most players spend a lot of energy creating a new reality. Doing so means creating fact and fiction about and within the world.

LARP-related fiction can be created inside or outside the perspective of the game. On the inside is what your character would experience and perform, and these activities contribute to the illusion: writing a letter to another character, telling a story, writing a song, reading a newspaper. This is commonly called "diegetic" information. Likewise, the term for the outside perspective is "nondiegetic," and that's what the players themselves know about the game. Nondiegetic information can be a booklet describing the world and its backstory, a presentation of the characters, or a map of the game area. Nondiegetic fiction can be a short story about your character written in the third person.

Creating diegetic and nondiegetic fiction and art is a great creative exercise that not only contributes to the collaborative work of art that is your LARP. It can also create seeds for other projects, and it even offers ways out of writer's block and other writing problems.

I wrote fiction for LARP for ten years. Some was commercial (stories designed for education or art projects); other tales were for fun, as art, or as storytelling experiments. For me, it all began with tabletop role-playing games. I was so excited after ending a session that I wanted to explore my character further and wrote anecdotes about important points in their lives. Shortly thereafter, I became part of a contemporary-

fantasy LARP project as a character developer. We wrote character sheets that consisted of ten pages of text and art illustrating the characters' lives: anecdotes, internal monologue, poetry, pictures, even made-up horoscopes.

In another project, loosely based on some of Ursula K. Le Guin's short stories of a civilization living in four-part marriages, characters were developed in family groups through drama exercises and group storytelling. We started out with no characters at all and would then do an exercise like the "statue game": Put two players in front of each other, pose them randomly, and then ask them: what's going on? What's your relationship to one another? Ten minutes later, the players would have figured out they were sister and brother and known what their childhood had been like. More of the family's story would surface when the pairs were switched out and were finally allowed to move and talk as their characters.

A third example is a LARP I organized about a 1970s commune, where the players were given only three lines of character information and had to discover the rest

during the game. We used a "do you remember?" kind of method for establishing relationships and history. A character would ask the other, "Do you remember when we demonstrated in that square, and you . . ." and then trail off, giving the other a chance to either say yes or no to this suggestion. The other might say, "Yes! I do remember! I threw a rock at the police, and they put me in jail." They could also say, "No, I don't. You must be thinking of someone else," but that wouldn't really lead anywhere. Saying yes is always more fun, even if it's "yes, but." With this collective dredging up of memories, the ensemble members established who they were, what their relationships were, and what the game was about.

The funny thing is that I very often suffered from writer's block, but *never* when writing or storytelling for LARPing. My own projects would wilt while I produced characters, game-related fiction, and entire story arcs for LARPs with seemingly little effort. I think this has to do with two things. Being alone with your story can be a huge burden, since all the responsibility of making it a good story lies with you.

Production photos and film stills from *Who Is Arvid Pekon?*, based on a Tidbeck story.

Creating a story with someone else eases that weight. With others along during the creative process, you go to unexpected and eye-opening places.

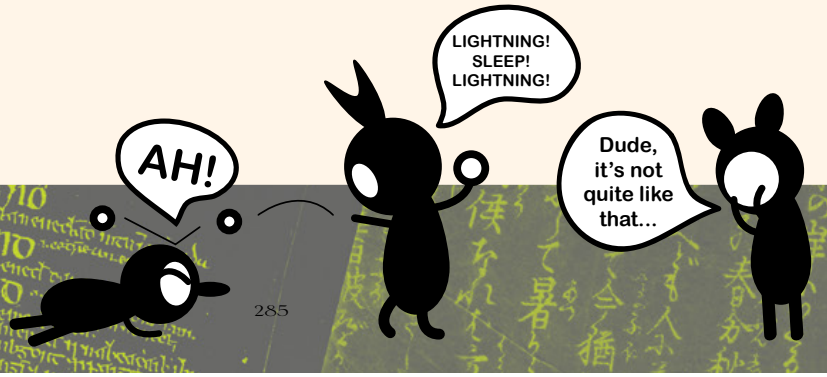
All forms of role-playing have a number of uses for a writer. If you organize one, you get to create a world and invite others to play. As a player, you train yourself in conquering fiction and making it yours; you learn to be open to your own creative impulses, to accept and incorporate input from others into your own art. Role-playing is also a great way to try on someone else's skin and see the world from a different point of view in a very hands-on manner. You can get to know your characters intimately by pretending to *be* them, not just pretending to *see* them.

LARPing gives you a 360-degree immersion, and you can really sink into that other person's mind. Doing something with your body is different than just going somewhere in your head. Add to that the sensation of physically experiencing the world as someone else, the mental agility that improvising with other people can give you, and the unexpected emotional impact of your character's feelings and state of mind bleeding over into yours. What's even better is that the presence of others will mean you're not completely in control of the story, which will jerk you out of your normal habits, if you're willing let it happen. Put briefly, you hone your storytelling skills in a number of ways.

The storytelling techniques used in role-playing and LARPing are extremely useful for a writer: for getting to know your characters and your world and for relieving writer's block, as well. If you're having trouble because your characters feel uninteresting, or you're not sure what they want, you can grab a friend and do the statue exercise. Or just have your LARPing buddy interview you as your character. You can write diary entries as your character. You can dress up as your character and try out moving or talking like him or her. I can't recommend playing a character from one of your stories for the entire length of a game, just like I'd never recommend playing yourself. Getting inside your character's head is good, but there's a balance between that and becoming too attached to and protective of your characters.

If your story is set in another world, then methods that LARP organizers use to enhance their players' experience can be handy. Does your world have newspapers? Write a news piece. What about literary traditions? You can write a poem or a passage from a book by a famous author. Write someone's shopping list, a bad joke, a list of popular insults.

Role-playing and improvisation are cardio exercises behind the creative process that supports fiction writing. You can participate in LARPs and games, you can join an improv theater group, or you can organize something yourself. You can tell any story in any genre, and it can go in just about any direction. For your brain, these are probably among the most exhilarating exercises ever, and they will reward you by offering a very interesting place to live and create.



WHO IS ARVID PEKON?

Just after lunch, Miss Sycorax's lamp started blinking again. Arvid hesitantly took the call.
"Hello," said the flat voice of Miss Sycorax.
"Where would you like to be connected?" said Arvid.
"I want to be connected to the Beetle King."
"I see," said Arvid and muted Miss Sycorax. He cast a frantic glance at Cornelia, who was deeply involved in yet another call with Subject 9970, Anderberg. Mrs. Cornelia frowned and waved him off. He returned to Miss Sycorax.
"Miss, I'm afraid I really can't connect you to anyone by the name of hello, my little pupa."
A rustling voice forced its way out of his mouth mid-sentence.

Who Is Arvid Pekon? had its beginnings in a 2002 avant-garde LARP version of *Hamlet* that I took part in. It was set in a bunker under Elsinore castle during the 1930s—a very elaborate and completely immersive game. There were three old field telephones in the game area, from which you could call to a "switchboard" and ask to be connected to characters not in the game. This was a tremendously useful system for feeding plot information to the players, advancing the story (Norway has invaded!), or just giving the players an extra dimension by letting them have a conversation with their mother or a friend. I was a player in the first staging of the game; in the second one, I was at the behind-the-scenes switchboard. We had a great time dialing up players to give them plot information or impersonating the people they wanted to talk to, all the while trying to keep track of who had said what and when. The next day I woke up with the idea of what would happen if such a switchboard existed in real life. The story I wrote has since been turned into a short film starring an acclaimed Polish actor. Stills from the film's shooting are reproduced on the opposite page.

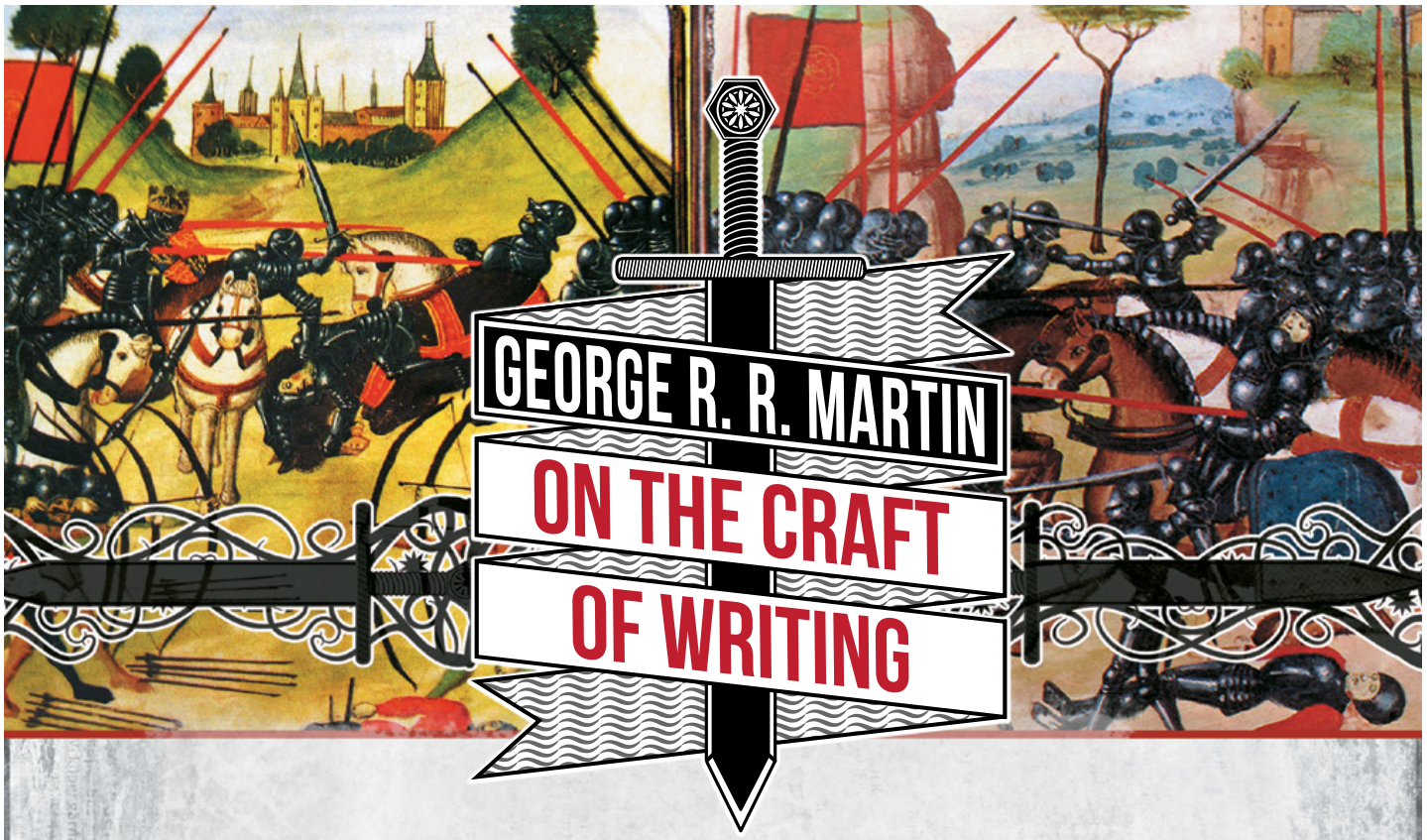
TIDBECK'S LARP EXERCISE: SWITCHING ROLES

This is actually a method more than an exercise. Doing writing exercises as someone else can help with both writer's block and getting out of a rut. It's most fun to do this in a group. It doesn't have to be a full-on role-playing situation, just a chance to step outside of your usual way of thinking.

Write some first names on scraps of paper (some of them must be of another gender than the one you identify as) and put them in a pile. Create another pile of notes, this time with professions. A third pile will have personality traits ("shy," "aggressive," "loves romance"). Draw one first name, one profession, and two personality traits. This is your character. Does it look meager? Don't worry; your brain will fill in the blanks in no time. It's what brains do. Now, do a simple writing exercise: automatic writing is a good place to start or use a prompt. Don't try to imagine what this character would write; just *pretend* you are him or her writing.

If it's hard to get into character, have someone interview you as your character. Again, your brain will fill in the blanks. If you're alone, write an introduction speech or a diary entry.

This method can be made as complex—or simple—as you like, and it can be applied to just about anything. For this to work, there's only one "must": respect what you're doing. Be sincere about your character and his or her work. Irony or sarcasm will kill the experience.



Four-time Hugo Award winner George R. R. Martin is one of the best-known fantasy writers of his generation. He has written for television and has crafted some of the most iconic stories of the past forty years, including "Sandkings" and "The Pear-Shaped Man." However, he is famous for his Song of Ice and Fire heroic fantasy series, which has sold millions of copies and been turned into a drama on the popular HBO television cable channel. Inspired by the War of the Roses, Martin's Song of Ice and Fire novels are known for their addictive nature, in part due to compelling characters and the complex yet page-turning story lines. I interviewed Martin via telephone to talk to him about those aspects of craft that contribute most notably to his success.

What does a typical rough draft of yours look like?

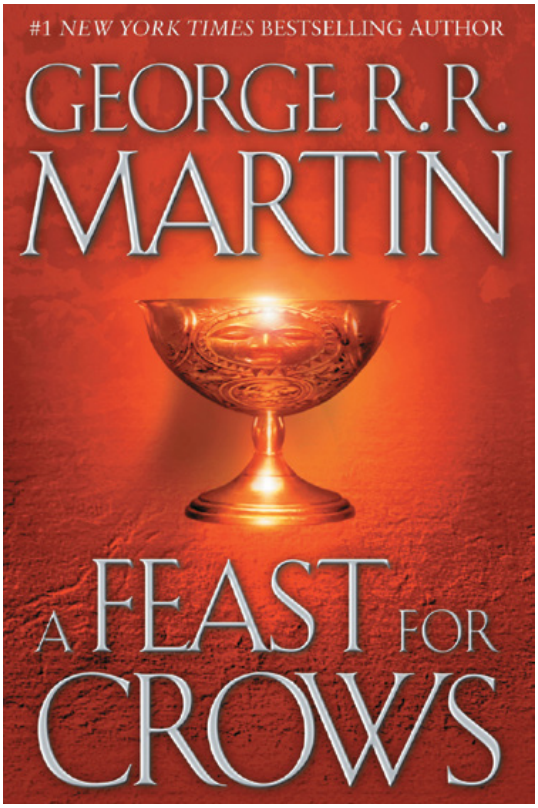
I don't really do drafts in the normal sense. I rewrite a lot as I go along. The first thing I do when I boot up in the morning is reread what I did the day before or the week before. Almost never can I reread something without fiddling with it and polishing it; changing things in what I like, what I don't like. Obviously a lot of of it is just correcting typos and infelicitous phrasing, but sometimes it's more thorough than that; it's structural changes. Rewriting is a constant process for me. I don't plunge through and do a first draft and then go back and do a second draft.

How often do the novels change as you're writing them? Do you often wind up somewhere very different from where you expected?

I wouldn't say very different. It depends on the novel. I think with Song of Ice and Fire I'm pretty well hitting all the beats as I originally envisioned them. I haven't taken too many detours. Although you do discover a lot in the actual process of writing, and that's part of the fun for me—the stuff that I discover along the way. If you go back to some of my earlier books, there were maybe more substantive changes; certainly, I made big changes in my novel *Fevre Dream*.

What changed in *Fevre Dream*?

My original intention for *Fevre Dream* was to end the book with a big steamboat race in which the *Fevre Dream* put out onto the river again and joined the famous race between the *Natchez* and the *Robert E. Lee*. Then I realized that really made no sense. It would've taken the whole world



into an alternate history, since that was such a huge public event, and also, given the actual life spans of steamboats, the steamboat would not have been in a condition to race. So I finally just said, "No, it was a colorful notion when I had it, but . . . no." The idea sort of survives in the actual text of the book as a dream that Abner Marsh has. You could read that and say that a more fully fleshed-out version of that would've been the original ending. But I think the actual ending I chose is much stronger and certainly much more realistic.

You've said your process includes "blind alleys and dead ends." How is that important to a writer?

I think it depends on the writer. I've often talked about there being two types of writers, which I call the Architects and the Gardeners. The Architects do plan everything ahead of time, just as a real architect does, building a house. An architect builds a house, and he knows how many rooms it's going to be, and how many square feet in each room, and where the pipes are, what the roof is going to be made of, the dimensions of everything, even where the plugs are going to be in the walls. He knows everything before a nail is driven, before the foundation is dug, and before all of the blueprints are proofed. There are writers who work that way.

The Gardener just sort of digs a hole and plants a seed, and then he waters it with his blood and sweat before waiting to see what will come up. It's not totally random, because obviously the Gardener knows what he's planted; he knows whether it's an oak tree or a pumpkin. If he's not taken totally by surprise by further inspiration, he has a general idea of what he's doing.

I don't think there are really many pure Architects or pure Gardeners in writing. I think most writers are a combination of the two. But they tend to lean to one side or another, and I lean very much to the side of the Gardener.

As a young writer, did you know you were a Gardener? Did it frustrate you that sometimes you got stuck?

I never really considered doing it any other way, but especially in the early years of my career I had a lot of aborted stories, or stories that I just started, and I had an opening scene, or I had a situation, then I wrote a page or two pages or ten pages, and then somehow I got stuck or it took a wrong direction. I would put that story in the drawer, and I would begin another story. I had a lot of fragments. I think that's what a lot of young writers go through. When Robert Heinlein gave his four rules for writing, the first one was "you must write," but the second one was "you must finish what you write." A lot of young writers somehow get stuck, or it goes awry and they don't finish those stories. Heinlein was right: You have to overcome that. It's a thing I think I have largely overcome, but I wouldn't say I have entirely overcome it.

Let's talk about scenes. You're masterful at being able to cut scenes for maximum tension. From your perspective, is achieving the right effect just a case of shortening or lengthening scenes?

I don't think it's purely a matter of the length of the scene, although certainly that is part of it. One of the things you learn working in television, if you want to keep working in television, is how

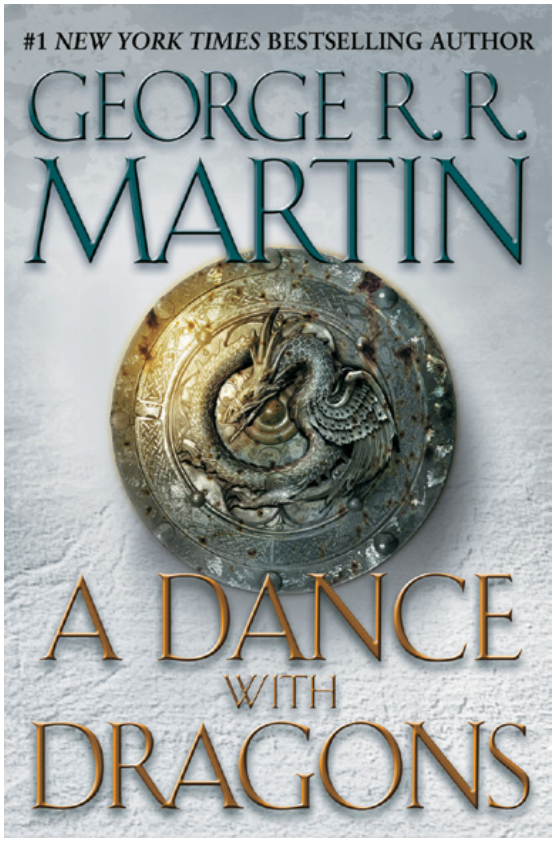
to structure your TV shows with act breaks, because you have to factor in where the story is going to stop. You don't want the viewer to click to another channel during that time. There are four-act shows and five-act shows, and four acts with a teaser, or whatever. There may be slightly different structures, but they all have act breaks.

Now, what is an act break? It can be a cliff-hanger. A cliff-hanger is obviously a very good act break, a very powerful act break. But you can't have a cliff-hanger at every chapter. An act break is something that ends the act on a note that hopefully will bring the viewer, or the reader, back into a resolution of something. It could be the introduction of a new element or an interesting new character, a twist or a turn that ends the chapter. Even sometimes just a snappy line of dialogue, something that takes you someplace unexpected or reveals something new about the character, or does a reversal. There are many kinds of act breaks. You want all of your chapters to end with that sort of act break; to end in such a way that, having finished that Tyrion chapter, the reader is anxious for the next Tyrion chapter, but, of course, he doesn't get it right away. He now has to read an Arya chapter or a Daenerys chapter or Jon Snow chapter.

Each of those ends with an act break, too. You read the Daenerys chapter, and then you want the next Daenerys chapter. Again, you can't have that, so there's this constant process going on. But I have to say it's not an easy process. Sometimes it doesn't work right. You reach the end of a chapter, and it just sort of dribbles out, and you have to figure out, well, what kind of act break can you do? Does it involve changing the chronology? Should you change your chronology? You don't want to get too tricky. I do a lot of rewriting and restructuring and rethinking because of this issue. Some of the early drafts have much weaker act breaks than others. This is one of the things I do when revising. It's not easy, but I think it's very much worth doing, and it gives you that page-turning effect you want.

Is there anything dramatized in the Song of Ice and Fire TV series so far that made you want to go back and tinker with something in the books?

I'm pretty happy with the books as they are. I don't know that I would want to tinker too much. The television series has added some great scenes that were not in the books, though. I'm thinking of the scene in the Black Water between Bran and the Hound or the Robert/Cersei scene, during the first season, where they discuss their marriage. Those are powerful scenes that I did not have in the books, probably because I have a very strict viewpoint structure and I don't have the viewpoint character present in any of those scenes. To include them in the books would mean abandoning my viewpoint structure—either that or changing and adding Robert as a viewpoint or adding the Hound as a viewpoint; those are not changes that I want to make. I don't want to just jump into a character for a scene and then never return to them. There's a reason why each viewpoint character is in the book, and I already have an awful lot of them. I don't think I want to add more.



Are there things that you typically have no interest in dramatizing?

I don't think I'd say there's a whole category of things—like, "I don't ever want to dramatize a dancing scene" or something like that. It all depends on the specifics of the scene and the book and what you're talking about. Battle scenes, for example, can get tedious.

In the first book, *Game of Thrones*, I had a situation where I had three battles occurring in fairly close proximity. The question I faced there is, "Well, am I going to dramatize all three of these battles," which would've involved many, many pages of people hitting other people with axes and descriptions of screaming horses and flights of arrows and, you know, "he swung the sword, and the other guy's sword hit his shield" and all that, which is fine and it adds something. But did I really want so much of that written out? So I decided to adopt a different approach there.

The first of those three battles I dramatized in the manner I've described. The second battle I chose to sort of half dramatize. I told it from the viewpoint of a character who was not part of the battle. She was on a hill overlooking the battle, and she couldn't see what was going on, but she could *hear* what was going on. All you got was the sound effects. You didn't actually get any visuals, and you were outside the battle rather than inside of it. For the third battle, I simply had a messenger arrive and tell what had happened.

I could've dramatized all three of those battles, but they were so close to each other that I think I would've been repeating the same sort of thing. Instead, I adopted different approaches. Now, will I always do that? No, not necessarily. Some things are best presented offstage and some things are best dramatized. Those are the kind of calls you have to make. When you come to each scene: Do I want to dramatize it; do I not want to dramatize it?

Another way this comes up is with travel. Especially in fantasy, geography is a big part of what you're doing, and the characters are traveling long distances. Do you just want to cut from one point on the map to the other? Okay, he gets on his horse, he rides up to the castle, and then you cut to four weeks later; he gets off his horse at the other castle he's going to at the other end of the realm. Or do you want to dramatize day by day what is happening to him and what he's thinking, what he's experiencing? Well, that partly depends on what happens on the journey: who he meets and what he learns and what his thoughts are.

You can have the story line where there's a lot of physical action. You could also have one where there's relatively little physical action, but you're setting a scene, you're showing what the land's kingdom is like, and you're doing some psychological exploration of the character. That's certainly the route I took with Tyrion's journeys in *A Dance with Dragons*. Yes, there are some very important events shown in the Tyrion scenes, but there's also a lot of stuff where he's meeting these other people, we're getting a sense of these other people, and he's going through some huge internal struggles.

Why are setting and description important?

I do think description is an important part of fantasy; at least epic fantasy. I read for vicarious experience. I want the writer to take me out of my skin and take me out of the place I am and bring me somewhere else, whether that place is ancient Rome or contemporary Chicago or some imaginary kingdom—and I want the sensory input. I want to hear the sounds and taste the food and smell the city and all of the things that are going on, so I get the illusion of actually being there. That's what I certainly strive to do as a writer. That's what I look for as a reader.

Setting is a huge part of fantasy. All of the great fantasies not only have great characters in them, they also have great settings. Take *The Dying Earth* by Jack Vance, which I know you love, too. Yes, we love Jack's characters—his various magicians and wizards and all the other clever creations—but a lot of them [read] for the world because the world was so wonderful. Middle Earth, Robert E. Howard's Hyborian Age, my own Westeros—the world is very important. This is something where I think a lot of fantasy falls down. There's nothing memorable about the worlds created. There's nothing unique about them.

It's interesting to me to look at Tolkien, who is always, I think, the model for me. I remember when Tolkien had his first great period of popularity back in the 1960s when I was at college. Everybody was reading Tolkien, and all the college students had "Frodo Lives" buttons and so forth, and they had posters on their dorm-room walls; my roommate had one of them. It was not a poster of a character; it was a map of Middle Earth. That was the big-selling poster, this map of Middle Earth; it was the land. The place had become a character, had become the soul of the book. Then you look at all the mini-Tolkien calendars that have come out since, and you see imaginary places, like Minas Tirith or the Mines of Moria, or the Woods of Lothlórien. I say those words and images are conjured in your mind. You see a picture of Minas Tirith, you recognize it just the same way you might recognize Paris or New York if either was depicted in a work of art.

You've said that visiting Hadrian's Wall was useful in terms of thinking of the Wall in the North in your series. How important are real world experiences to a fantasy setting?

This was a visit to Hadrian's Wall in 1981, more than a decade before I made use of it. It was a feeling that I always remembered because of the circumstances. I was traveling around England and Scotland with the writer Lisa Tuttle, and we finally reached Hadrian's Wall, which was a place we had wanted to visit. It was a late afternoon in October or November, I think, and coming on toward evening, and all of the other tourists were leaving. The sun was starting to set, and it was starting to get cold and dark. The tour buses had all gone.

A view of Hadrian's wall.

We climbed up on the wall and had it all to ourselves. With the shadows growing, and the sort of loneliness of standing there, with the winter wind coming up. I stood there and tried

to imagine myself as a Roman legionary from Italy or from Carthage in Africa or from Antioch in the Middle East, and I pretended we'd been assigned there. You're guarding the end of the world, and you're looking at those distant hills and those woods, and you don't know what's going to lurk from them to threaten you and what you're protecting. It gave me a shiver. I held on to that shiver for all those years, and ultimately made use of it when the time finally came to write *Game of Thrones*.

There's a scene in *A Dance with Dragons* that I thought was particularly evocative, where Tyrion is on a boat going down a stretch of haunted river, with ruins to either side and odd events happening. I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about that scene.

I've always been attracted to rivers; there's just something very cool about being on a river and floating down it. You're seeing the banks go by, and you don't know what's around the next bend of the river. There's almost a sense of mystery that is sort of exciting, and I wanted to capture some of that. I also had some material that I wanted to produce there about the history of that place, and backstory that I may pick up in the future—all of which I had hinted at in prior books—and now Tyrion was traveling through the midst of that.

The mists and the history and the curse give that scene its wounded feel. There's a lot of stuff going on; games within games below the surface. Even as Tyrion is fencing, he's figuring out things and pieces are falling into place. And there are the Stone Men, the victims of greyscale, which is something I wanted to get in . . . this disease.

I read a lot of history and a lot of historical fiction. The things that have impressed me about actual history include the great extent to which our real history was affected by things like the Black Death and rats and fleas and these various plagues that would sweep over Europe or Asia at particular points of time. They have more impact on our history than we recognize, but you seldom see them in fantasy. No one ever seems to get sick in a lot of fantasy novels, despite the fact that the people in the books don't really understand about germs and bacteria and things like that, and their medicine is relatively primitive, which is all part of why these things are a problem. All of that was at play in that chapter.

It's also a very strange scene, something I love about it. I love strangeness in fantasy, but sometimes you're told that you can only have so many strange elements before the reader loses interest. Does this figure into your thoughts ever?

I certainly keep it in mind. It was always my intention to start Song of Ice and Fire with almost no fantasy elements in it, traditional fantasy elements, and then to slowly introduce more, so the amount of magic and strangeness in the books would gradually rise through the series. Even at the end, when I finish the series, it's still going to be low fantasy compared to the very high magic kind of stuff that a lot of fantasy writers out there are doing, where the amount of sorcery and wizardry and spells and such is huge right from the start.

But I just don't find those books as compelling as the ones that are relatively low magic. Again, I go back to Tolkien, even though he had elves and various races and hints of magic in there. I mean, Gandalf being a wizard and all that—you don't really see Gandalf working at his spells. And he doesn't have any super-duper magical weapons. He just fights with his sword like everybody else. The magic swords that various people have, these legendary swords with names, mostly don't have

any particular power except they glow blue when orcs are about. I think Tolkien was a pretty smart guy in the way he handled all of that.

Are you saying magic can become a kind of repetitive special effect?

One reason is my own beliefs about magic: If you're going to have magic in your story, you have to keep it magical, so to speak. This is a supernatural element. It doesn't follow the laws of nature. It doesn't follow any laws we understand. There's something frightening about it. This is the unknowable. I think magic should be handled that way. Magic should always remain a little mysterious and a little dangerous. Even though I know there are a lot of fantasy writers out there who devote a lot of time to inventing magical systems: "This is how magic works in my world, and here are the rules of it and so forth."

Magic should not have a system. This essentially reduces magic to fake science, where we have magic rules, and if you put in so much eye of newt and so much virgin's blood into this, you will get something that does that. Well, maybe you will, maybe you won't. I more like the idea that you can't really master some of these things. There are dangers to that and they're not completely understood; make the supernatural dangerous, make the supernatural mysterious. Don't make it just fake science.

You've said that identifying with characters not like yourself is a process of empathy. But what do you need to know about a character to write from a perspective that's different from your own?

It really varies character to character. For some characters you want a lot of backstory; for others, maybe not so much. I don't think there's a hard-and-fast rule about that. Jack Vance is a writer who has always done very well with this, because I always get the feeling when I read a Vance story that all of the characters are people, even the minor characters.

One of Vance's characters checks into an inn, and you know the innkeeper is going to emerge, even if he's only there for two pages, as a definite presence. Whether he's a fool or a rogue, he has his own thing going. He doesn't know that he's a bit player in a larger story. He thinks he's living in the middle of a story in which the hero is Bill the Innkeeper. I always try to keep that in mind—that each minor character who comes on, even if it's only for one scene, has his own agenda, his own ideas, and he's not just there to serve the leads, so to speak. I don't know if that helps make the characters a little more real, but it seems to work.

But, yes, there are definitely challenges to writing characters unlike you, the writer. There's no doubt about that, and if you're going to write fantasy and science fiction, you're inevitably going to wind up needing to do just that. If I was to write characters exactly like myself, I'd just be writing endless stories about baby-boomer kids born in New Jersey, growing up in the projects in blue-collar families. Which is fine, and I've written about characters like that. But I also want to write about kings and aliens and spaceship captains and all of that—all these things that I've never been.

I think the approach that I take, whoever I'm writing about, is to remember our shared humanity, because the truth is, as much as there are differences between us, we are all basically human; we all have the same fundamental drives. It doesn't matter if I'm writing about a man or a woman, or a giant or a dwarf, or a young person or an old person; they have a certain common humanity. They have far more in common than they have things that separate. If you keep this in mind, I think you'll do pretty well.

Can you give me a specific example where you have gotten stuck because you couldn't figure out something important about a character?

In some cases you have an experience that you're going to write about that you don't actually know about. You have to ask people who might perhaps know about it. I suppose one example that comes to mind is in the first book, when Sansa gets her first period. Obviously this is something, as a male, that I did not go through. It was a crucial scene. Sansa knew she was a captive and that she was supposed to be married to Joffrey, an event postponed because she was still a child. Now suddenly she wasn't a child. In the medieval mind-set, there's no kind of concept of adolescence; you

go straight from childhood to adulthood—for girls, the start of menstruation, or the "flowering," as they call it. Sansa was now eligible to be married and to be bedded. That's the onset of sexual maturity by their standards.

So I talked to a number of women about the subject, since it's not a subject I often sit around talking about with friends. I said, "Okay, I'm going to ask you a question—it might be a little embarrassing." I had to ask: "What was it like the first time for you? Were you afraid? Did you take it in your stride? What were the physical things? What were your feelings about it?" Yes, not everybody was comfortable talking about it, but some were. I learned a lot about the subject, which I then used in that scene. I think that's what you have to do when you are going to write a scene that involves an experience, an important experience, that you have never had.

What do you think was the weakest part of your writing in the early part of your career?

Working in Hollywood sharpened my dialogue, most notably. When you're writing for television and screen, and particularly if you're on a television show—where what you write is actually going to be made and you're actually going to hear actors rehearsing it and saying it—it rapidly becomes apparent what kind of speeches work and what kind of speeches don't work. When you hear actors saying the lines or a line that's awkward or badly phrased, or admits too many possible readings, that fact jumps out at you.

I think television also improved my sense of structure; that whole act-break thing I talked about before.

How important is it for a writer to be really well-read in the field they're entering?

Actually, there's a certain double-edged sword there. If you're not well-read in the field that you're going into, you run a risk of reinventing the wheel. Of course, you do see this sometimes with mainstream writers who come into science fiction and fantasy. They're using ideas that

"They Weren't Alone" by Charles Vess (*A Storm of Swords* Vol. 1, limited edition, 2002)

were old twenty years ago. On the other hand, sometimes people coming in from the outside can bring a different way of looking at things. They're not necessarily so inculcated with the tropes and stereotypes and things, so they're less likely to duplicate them—and sometimes they can do something that's very fresh and original and interesting. You can argue that logic, certainly. Myself, I'm inclined to think it is better to know who went before and what they did.

When I teach at the Clarion Writers' Workshop, or Clarion West or something like that, I always try to encourage the students to read widely in science fiction and fantasy. I remember the first time I taught at Clarion, I circulated a list of fifty great books that every science-fiction writer should read, or maybe not-great books: just fifty books every science-fiction writer should read. Some of them are actually pretty bad books, but they were important books in one way or another in the history of the genre. I did that because in the class it had rapidly become apparent to me that a lot of the participants had never read any of these writers. I was making references to classic stories and novels, and I was getting these blank looks, which I didn't think was good.

Can you remember some of the worst advice about writing you received as a beginning writer?

I remember one editor told me very early in my career when rejecting one of my stories that I should try writing gothics for a while, and I would learn a lot from that. I didn't find that tremendously helpful. But I don't know if I got much bad advice, in general. You get bad advice on specific stories, or, at least, editors or producers or networks will want you to make changes to a story that are not necessarily, you know, good, and you have to resist that. There is sometimes a tendency, particularly for young writers, not to resist, because you want to sell your work and you don't want to get a reputation for being difficult. That's perfectly human. Nobody wants to be difficult. Still, it's your name that's going to be on the book, which is

why prose will always be my first love over television and film, much as I love television and film. It's your book. Editors will make suggestions, but ultimately all they can do is reject a story, and then you can sell it to someone else if you really believe in it. I would say never do anything that you think will make the story worse, because ultimately you will be judged on the quality of the story. You can't plead, "The editor made me do it."

Who was most helpful to you as a beginning writer?

That's an interesting question. I don't know that I really had a mentor. I was kind of off by myself writing my own stories. I read voraciously, and, among other things, I read how-to books. One of the first books about writing science fiction [I read] was L. Sprague de Camp's science-fiction handbook, which I encountered in my public library in Bayonne, New Jersey. I took it out and read it, and then I had to return it. But I took it out again and again and again. Whenever it was due, I would return it, and then I would take it out again. I kept it on my shelf for a year through this ruse. That work had a huge influence on me, but I can't claim that de Camp himself was a mentor. I met him once or twice and talked to him, but I'm not even sure if he knew who I was.

I think the writer and editor Ben Bova was probably the most important editor in my early career. He took over *Analog* magazine in 1971, just as I was starting, and he edited it through most of the 1970s. *Analog* became my main market. It became the market where most of my best stories were published. Then, of course, when Ben went on to *Omni*, he in a sense took me with him, and I published one of my most successful stories, "The Pear-Shaped Man."

What about feedback from your readers? You have a huge audience. I imagine some readers have very definite ideas about what you should and shouldn't write.

I do get a lot of feedback from readers. Most of it is just fan letters; it's very complimentary. But I do get letters from people saying, "please don't kill this character, I love them" or "don't hurt this other character," which I read and certainly I'm aware of, but I make no promises. Again, I don't think you can let your story be changed by readers. I think that's a mistake.

Art is not a democracy, as I've said many times. The readers don't get to vote on how it will end. There have been periods in history where *Romeo and Juliet* was staged, and they would change the ending because the audience didn't like the fact that Romeo and Juliet both die at the end. They would change the ending so Romeo and Juliet lived happily ever after. That was an audience pleaser during the Victorian era and earlier eras. It was bad. It lessened the power of that work as a piece of art.

Obviously, you've got to please some of the readers, or you're not going to have a career. At the same time, you can't always be running around trying to please them all and taking votes or saying, well, what do you think would be the best way to end this kind of . . . the way that Hollywood does. I think that's a mistake. On my blog I posted, in response to some of these issues, a YouTube video of Ricky Nelson's "Garden Party," which is sort of my anthem, because he sings that you have to please yourself, not everybody else. That's what a writer has to do. In the end, it's your name on it; it's your story. You hope that other people will like it, but it's your story not their story. They can write their own story and end it how they really want.