WRITING TIPS FOR FANTASY & GENRE WRITERS

145 FREE PAGES !!

Who are these tips for?
These tips are for genre writers not literary writers, for storytellers not writers of semi-autobiographical memoirs. Some of them apply specifically to fantasy, SF and horror, most of them work for any popular fiction that needs page-turning excitement, suspense and a strong storyline.

Are they good for everyone?
I don't believe any tips are universal—it depends what you start out with. If you naturally write with very few adjectives, you don't need advice on cutting them down. If your tendency is to show events dramatically, you'll have more use for advice about telling events over time—and vice versa. Some things I do automatically I've probably never thought about.

Why listen to Richard Harland?
Looks like *Worldshaker* could be my breakthrough into the big time, but I'm not J.K.Rowling yet, that's for sure. What I have is a sort of schizophrenia—one half of my brain creates and writes, while the other half observes. I think a lot about what does and doesn't work, and I've tested my ideas in hundreds of creative writing workshops.

I still plan on being J.K. Rowling some day, though …

Why are you doing this for free?
So far, I'm a middling-successful author with 15 published books of fantasy, SF and horror, some for adults, some YA and some for younger readers. I reckon that makes me luckier than most, so this is my way of getting good karma and giving something back.

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The main sections are:

I. GOOD WRITING HABITS (and good revising habits)

II. THE ELEMENTS (Action; Setting; Dialogue; and presenting the inner thoughts of characters)

III. CHARACTERS (including Point of View)

IV. STORY (telling a story; and momentum, pacing)

V. LANGUAGE (style, names, special ways of using language)

VI. GETTING PUBLISHED (and things to do after publication)

Here's to good karma! If you find these tips helpful, pass the word along! And please, be fair. The material on this site is free, but if you use it in workshops or classes or whatever, let people know where it came from. I had to take 4 months off writing fiction to produce it!

GOOD WRITING HABITS

Sub-sections & Pages

1. Preparation

(i) HOW TO HAVE IDEAS

It's the question everyone loves to ask—'how do you get your ideas?'—and the question every writer dreads having to answer. The truth is that ideas just pop into existence, and no one really knows where they were hanging around beforehand.

It would be handy if there were some high-powered meditation technique to make them pop into existence, but I don't know what it is. I think the best you can do is not let the ideas you have go to waste.

THE PIT OF LURKING DEEP IDEAS
(approaching authors in top left corner)

If these were tips for semi-autobiographical fiction, I'd probably be talking about closely observing the real life around you, making notes on fellow-passengers on the train, etc. But that's not enough for genre fiction, especially not speculative fiction.

You need to observe in a what-if state of mind. What if that man on the train had a long knife in the package he's cradling in his lap? What if that building-site hole in the ground didn't stop five metres down, but went down for kilometres? What if these cracks in the pavement had a significant pattern, and stepping on them in a certain order changed the dimensions of space and time? Maybe a what-if kind of mind is something you're born with, but you can surely encourage it further.

I used to answer how-do-you-get-your-ideas questions by talking about my dreams, because it's true, I do draw on a lot of dream-material. After a while, though, it starts to sound corny—'It came to me in a dream.' Yeah, yeah, yeah …

Still, if you have vivid dreams, record them, don't let them go to waste. My trick was to keep pen and paper by the bed, so that, when I woke up out of a dream, I could

write down a dozen or so words, often in the dark, then sink back asleep. In the morning, those words were enough to bring back the memory (when I could read my own writing).

1. Preparation

(ii) RECORD EVERYTHING

Recording dreams is a special case of the general principle: record everything! If you're serious about writing, record your ideas in a journal, in notebooks, on laptop or netbook. I used to write in notebooks, now I write on loose bits of paper that I file away in a filing cabinet. Whatever suits.

I can't prove it, but I suspect there's a reverse effect too. The more you write down your what-ifs, the more new what-ifs will jump into your mind. At the very least, your mind will be better prepared to pay attention to them.

It's like a poster for the writing life, that picture of the writer jotting down inspired ideas on the back of a shopping docket or restaurant napkin. Fine! Nothing wrong with shopping dockets and restaurant napkins. But don't be precious about it. You still need to store your notes in readable form where you can find them again later.

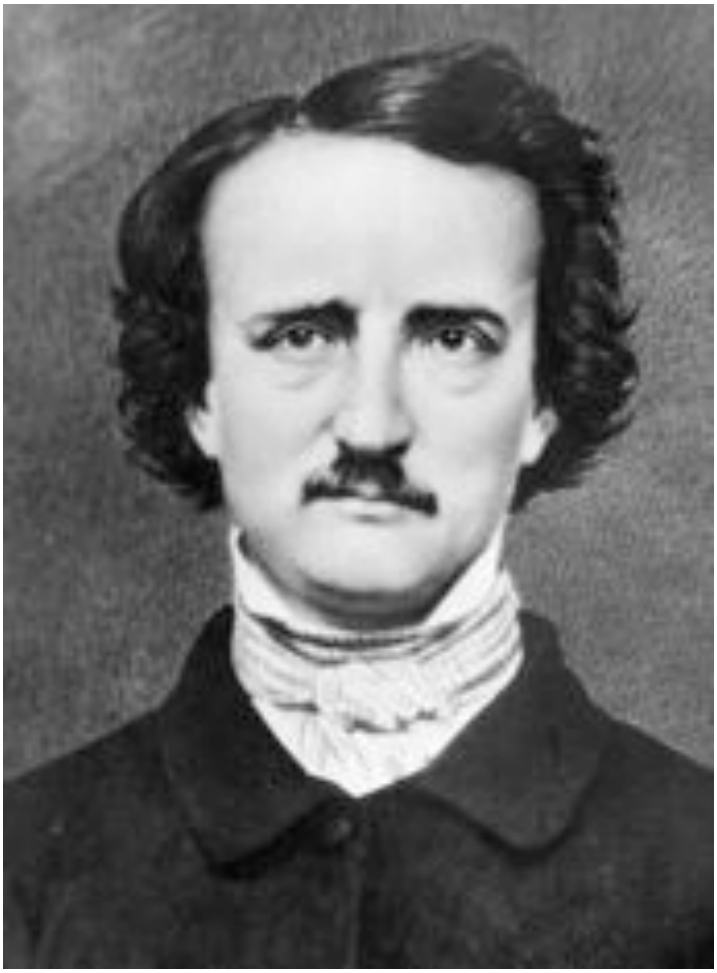
Most ideas won't get used immediately, not if you're in it for the long haul, not if you're accumulating ideas for more than one novel at a time. So you need to be able to go back, jog your memory and see what might fit with current plans. It's not a picture to put on a poster for the writing life, but a little organisation now will save a heap of frustration later.

1. Preparation

(iii) READING FOR INSPIRATION

Reading widely is good for ideas too—better than the visual media, because you have more time to let the what-if side of your mind roam wild and free. I admit, I don't mind at all when books suggest ideas but fail to develop them. That's where I jump in! Selfishly speaking, I'll take an inspiring failure over an uninspiring success any day.

Getting totally swept away by one particular novel or author probably isn't a good thing. It could be necessary thing, a stage we all have to go through, but you don't come into your own as a writer until you emerge on the other side. So, right, work through that that *Da Vinci Code* obsession or that *Harry Potter* phase—for me, it was Edgar Allan Poe and *The Lord of the Rings*—but keep reading other stuff too. A single influence is a bad influence!



Edgar Allan Poe, wondering when someone's going to inspire *him* for a change

I always suggest reading beyond one's own genre. I wish I had more time to do more of it myself. Everything I write is speculative fiction, most often fantasy, but my characters are as likely to be inspired by characters in crime fiction or family drama or biography.

(Or half-inspired—more on characters later)

For a fantasy writer, historical non-fiction can be a great source of inspiration. If you write at the historical romance end of the fantasy spectrum, you'll be doing research into a particular period anyway. For general fantasy ideas, though, I recommend reading the histories of many periods—and reading in a what-if state of mind.

Reading widely is good for the SF writer too, but there are also special reasons for keeping up to date with what's happening in SF itself. More than any other genre, SF depends upon new ideas and leaves old ideas behind. No amount of character-depth

or interesting action can redeem an SF story about a man who travels back in time and kills his own grandfather. The idea's been used up—move on! Or, add a new twist that no one's ever thought of before. Which means, again, that you need to find out what's been already thought.

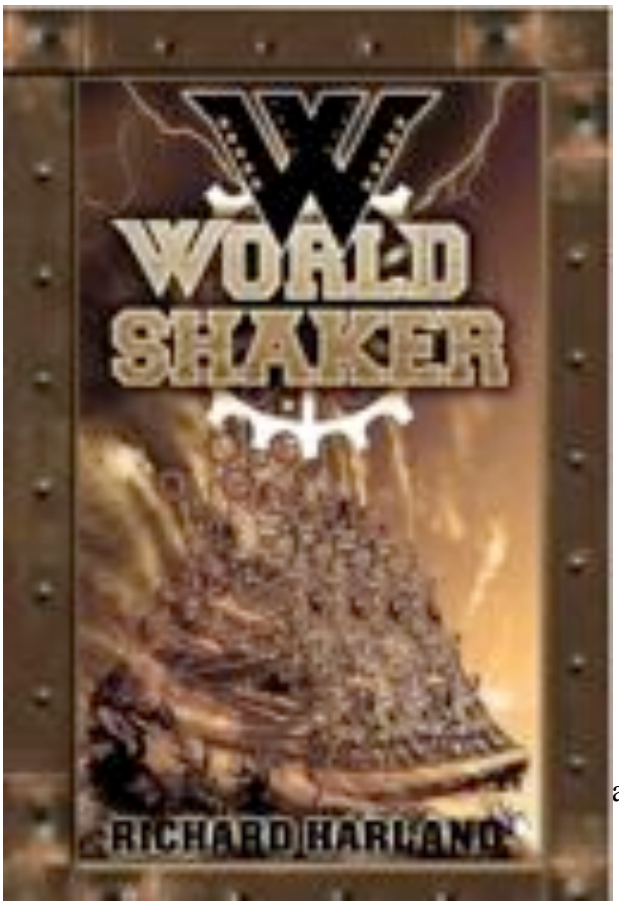
As for where-ideas-come-from, okay, I still haven't answered the question. Can someone please hurry up and develop that high-powered meditation technique …

1. Preparation

(iv) WHERE TO START

I love to hear other writers talk about how a novel evolved, from the first tiny seed, to a critical mass, to all the extras. It's fascinating—and at the same time, completely unhelpful! Because there's no best starting-point from which writers generally begin the creating of a novel. An image, a character, an atmosphere—it's different for every author, and every time. Gloriously random!

Thinking back on some of my own novels, I remember that *The Dark Edge* began from a feeling—the feeling of being hunted across the universe by some implacable, retribution-seeking force; *Hidden from View* began from a dream, which became the book's first chapter; *The Black Crusade* began with the words of the title, which I picked up from a passing phrase in an M.R. James short story; *Sassycat* began with a sense of Sassycat's personality; and *Worldshaker* began from a dream of falling down a slot-like cavity past endless levels of unbelievably constricted living-quarters.



Sometimes those starting-points stayed central, sometimes they ended up more on the outskirts. For example, the falling-down episode doesn't come into play until Chapter 26 of *Worldshaker*, and the hunted feeling in *The Dark Edge* appears only in a very late revelation of the novel's pre-story.

What matters isn't your starting-point, but how you accumulate other material around it. Old ideas drawn in from notebooks, new ideas generated before and during the writing-process. Perhaps one and

character leads on to other characters, who lead on to a story, which leads on to particular settings. Or contrariwise, a setting leads on to a story, which leads on to characters. What matters is how you accumulate other material in a way that makes it impossible to recognise your starting-point!

If the reader can guess that, say, a particular character came first in the author's mind—bad! That shows you haven't brought the rest of the novel up to the same level as your initial inspiration. If it looks as though elements in the novel are merely servants to some master-idea, you've got a problem.

The actual history of the making of a novel should disappear into the novel as made.

1. Preparation

(v) REAL FEELINGS

Shameful confession! I had writer's block for 25 years. Seriously, I ought to go down in the Guinness Book of Records. I still have thirty MSS from that time—some only started, some with just a couple of chapters left to go. But not one finished! Aggh!

I look back now and see many reasons why I blocked, most of them stupid and unnecessary. One was—trying to write too far outside my own experience. I could present the facts but I couldn't generate the feeling.

For example: a story about an old man dying. I struggled endlessly over that story, without ever realising the basic problem—I was only eighteen at the time!

Of course, you don't have to be an old man dying to write about an old man dying, but you need some grains of similar experience to work from. If I attempted that story now, I'd hark back a period when I had Bell's Palsy. A mild case, lucky for me, and I didn't even know I had it at the time—but for about four months, I really did have this sense of old age, where everything seemed sort of sunset-y.

I think it's the feeling that matters. I've discovered the hard way that the experiences I write about best are experiences that have strong emotional associations for me. I'll never get round to drawing up a list, but I recognise I have my own individual stock of emotional resources. Many of them, the majority of them, go way back to childhood … after all, isn't that when experiences are at their most intense?

What I'm saying is probably as simple as—don't try to write a horror story about spiders if you've never suffered even a twinge of arachnophobia. Or, failing arachnophobia, some similar fear of some similar kind of creepy-crawly. Learn your own resources and draw on them! It's obvious for writers in more realistic genres, but not always so obvious for writers of fantasy fiction.

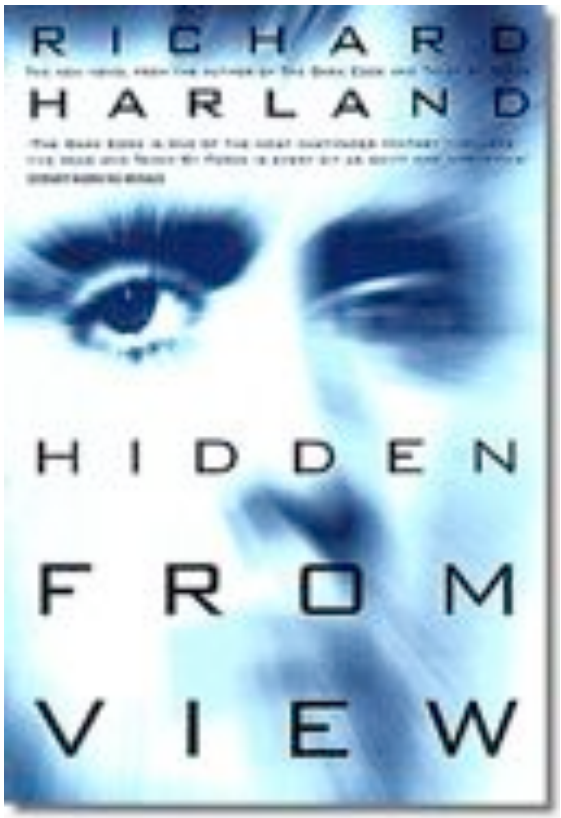
Or at least, it wasn't obvious to me …

1. Preparation

(vi) REAL FEELINGS IN FANTASY

The fantasy writer is more likely to be dealing with spiders as big as cows or armies of super-intelligent spiders, rather than common-and-garden spiders. Often the imagination leaps out first into some far-flung possibility. But you still need to tie that possibility back to a real feeling—for yourself, for the reader.

A much-quoted line by the American poet, Marianne Moore, talks about poetry presenting 'imaginary gardens with real toads in them.' Okay, then, fantasy fiction presents unreal situations with real feelings in them.



The easiest way to tie unreal situations back to real feelings is to seek out some similar experience, usually on a far, far smaller scale. In my SF thriller, *Hidden from View*, there are virtual reality, sensi-feel games that give the actual sensations of, for example, falling and crashing to the ground at 500 kph—all the way through to a virtual reality death. Easy! All I had to do was remember past funfair rides, one in particular that scared the bejasus out of me. Getting strapped in … nervous anticipation … the whirr of machinery … I-wanna-get-off! All the same, but more so.

In *Worldshaker*, the action takes place on board a juggernaut, a rolling mountain of metal, four kilometres long and one kilometre high. In an early scene, Col gets to go up on top of the Bridge, out in the open for the very first time, and surveys the vast landscape they're travelling over.

> Openness on every side! … It was like sailing in the sky … His vision swam with the vast scale of it all. … There were the grey metal decks of *Worldshaker*, far, far below—but even more, the landscape spreading out all

> around, unfolding into the distance! A panorama of forests, hills and seas! … He traced a winding boundary between the blue of the sea and the colours of the land … etc etc.

Although I've never had Col's juggernaut experience, it was easy to remember panoramic views and the emotions they stir up in me. Fact is, I'm a bit of an agoraphobe—I find wide open spaces disturbing and exciting. I'm also a cartophile—I dote on maps and atlases. So I know I have the feeling to put into a scene like this.

Panoramic views have popped up in my novels ever since Martin Smythe, in *The Vicar of Morbing Vyle*, escaped up through a chimney and surveyed a whole wide snow-covered world from the vicarage roof. I do claustrophobic scenes—working from moments of claustrophobia that surely everyone experiences—but agoraphobic scenes are a speciality!

The great thing about fantasy is the way you can amplify real feelings. I don't believe you can imagine a feeling you've never had, but you can imagine a feeling to a new degree of intensity.

(Maybe that's what all fiction is about? Genre fiction anyway …)

1. Preparation

(vii) TO PLAN OR NOT TO PLAN

Some authors are planners, others fly by the seat of their pants. The more I talk to other professional writers, the more I come to the conclusion that there's no best way.

I know some authors who jump straight in and others who never start until they have a detailed chapter-by-chapter outline; some who zoom through a first draft at top speed, then revise; others who think out a climax, then work carefully backwards. It's amazing how such different methods can all end up producing great results. What matters, as with starting-points, is that the method doesn't leave a mark on the finished novel. The proof of the pudding etc …

Me, I'm on the planning side. I think in waves and stages rather than chapters, but I enjoy thinking about a novel in advance. Writing fantasy, I also spend a long time—often years—designing a backdrop world before I start telling the story. I guess that's a tendency for all fantasy writers, as thinking out a climax first would be a tendency for detective mystery writers. Still, fantasy writers can also jump in, then pause to develop their worlds along the way. I had to take months off in the middle of writing *Ferren and the Angel* to create the history of Ferren's world.

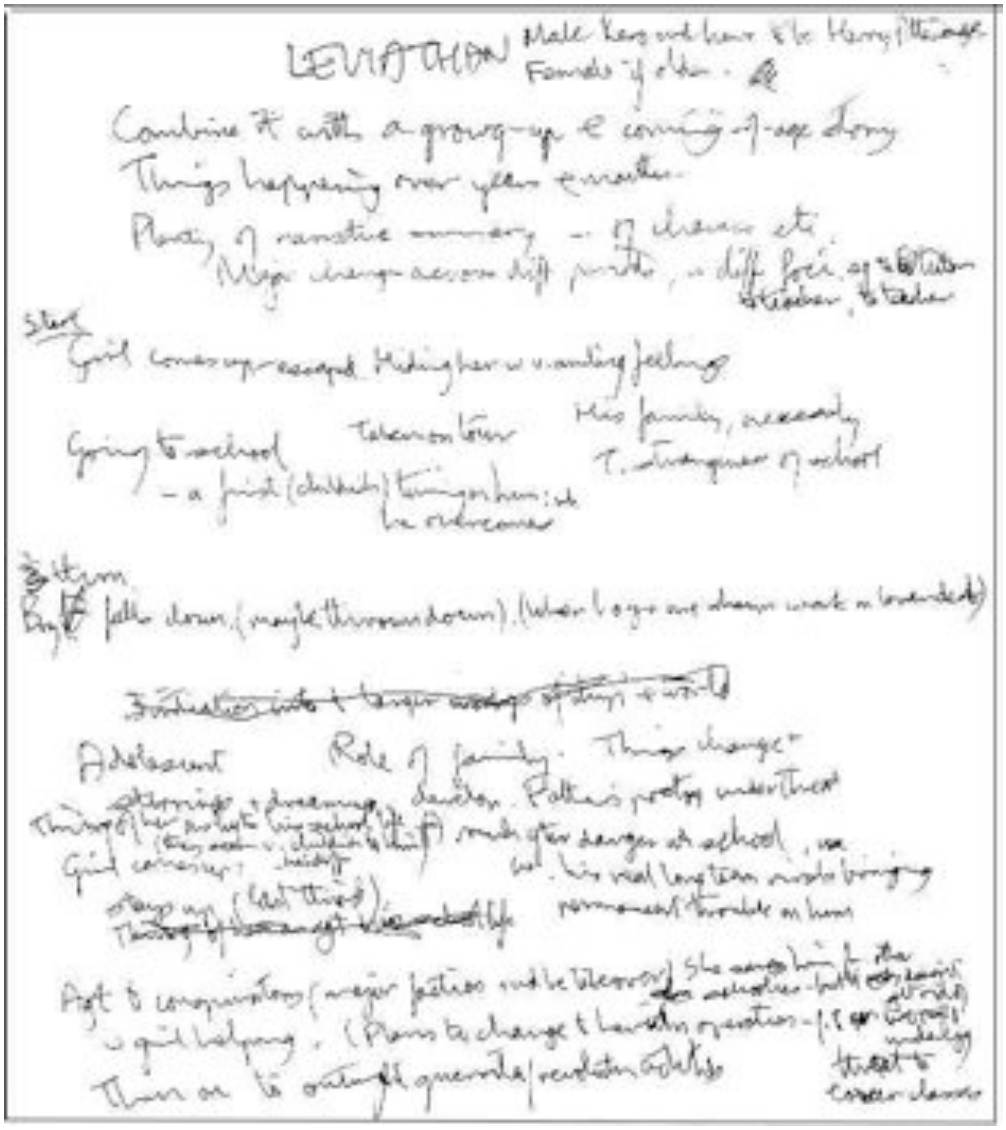
Nevertheless … I'm going to backtrack here. Although you can be a planner or a non-planner, I think there's one kind of planning that's asking for trouble, and ditto with one kind of non-planning.

With planning, it's the fixed plan. That is, the plan you're determined to stick with all the way through, no matter what. Let's face it, you could spend forever planning a novel and it would still be too big to get completely on top of. Your story and characters will always shift and develop new angles as you write, so you need to stay flexible. Learn from your novel, don't just order it around.

With non-planning, the danger is in not looking ahead at all. It sounds good to talk of letting a story take care of itself, but unless you do some selecting and shaping, events are liable to peter away as they do in real life. Entropy rules! Fizzle-out endings are okay for semi-autobiographical fiction and literary fiction, but genre fiction needs big satisfying endings.

An author may not write notes or consciously plan, but I believe that every genre author has at least an instinct for heading somewhere interesting, where events will start building up on themselves. If the author isn't bothered about what happens ahead, why should the reader be?

Most of all, you can't pull a big ending out of the hat at the last minute. I think of a novel like a great unwieldy monster thundering across the landscape, and the author sits on its back with just a couple of strings for reins. No way can you slew that monster round suddenly in a desired direction. If you want a big climactic ending, you need to start guiding towards it, with tiny amounts of pressure, from very early on.



SOME EARLY PLANNING NOTES FOR *WORLDSHAKER* (when it was still called *Leviathan*)

That's my scrappy handwriting - I should've been a doctor …

1. Preparation

(viii) WRITING TO A RECIPE

If I have a few projects planned—and I usually do—I'll go with the one that seems to have the best prospects in the market right now. But that's very different to turning out a book to order because of a market demand.

It's true, markets for particular kinds of books rise and fall all the time. One minute, publishers are all looking for historical family sagas, next minute, they're all looking for supernatural YA stories.

But here's the snag. If you don't have your historical family saga or supernatural YA story already written, you've already missed the boat. Publishers have sniffed out the next big wave long before it attracts media attention, long before you or I have heard of it.

As I type this, Stephanie Meyer's 'Twilight' series is the current big wave we all know about. Hundreds of hopeful authors are probably turning out Daughter-of-Twilight books right now, and you can bet that publishers are gritting their teeth as they await the forthcoming deluge. As with Harry Potter, so with *Twilight*—if you're not at the leading edge of the wave, you're nowhere.

Writing quickly won't help. There's still a huge time-lag between a publisher accepting an MS and the book appearing on the bookshop shelves. Rarely much less than a year—and that's without reckoning the incalculable time-lag between an author finishing an MS and a publisher accepting it.

So, yes, it helps to have a market opening up at the right time for your book, but that's mostly a matter of luck. Be hard-headed about not being hard-headed. The best policy is still to write the book that you can write better than anyone else.

(More on luck and timing later)

2. Writing Through

(i) WRITING ROUTINE

Most of the professional writers I know have a regular writing routine. A short story can be written in a single burst of inspiration, but a novel has to be written day in and day out over a long period.

My routine is to start work every day of the week straight after breakfast. Morning, I've learned, is my most motivated time. But the key thing is habit.

I used to be a baulker. Whenever it was time to start writing, I could always find a million excuses. My head wasn't in the right state, I needed to re-check my notes, something, anything. I dreaded taking the plunge.

Now I'm in the habit of starting straight after breakfast. I know I'm going to do it, so I don't have to wrestle myself into doing it. I start writing first and inspiration comes second.

Well, how can you expect to be newly inspired with ideas every time you sit down to write? Novels don't work like that. The inspiration that goes into them is infinitely bigger than any one day's writing.

My important discovery was that, once I get stuck into the writing, sooner or later the whole story and world will start sweeping me along again. They're bigger than me, built up over weeks and months of planning and writing. My particular mood on this particular day doesn't matter.

That discovery helped me get over my 25 years of writer's block. Another discovery was that I could trust to the story and world in my head, without re-reading notes or yesterday's writing. Or, at least, without judging whether they're good or bad.

Okay, I do sometimes skim through the last paragraphs of yesterday's writing—but I refuse to let myself think about possible improvements. Once I get caught up in backwards revisions, I'm lost. I start fiddling with phrases and the order of sentences, I start hesitating and obsessing over tiny things. No! What I need to recover is the large-scale feel and thrust of the novel as a whole.

I'm lucky I can arrange my days. I take my hat off to anyone who has to fit their writing into moments of free time. Especially mothers of small children—I don't know how you do it!

One thing I've heard said—and it corresponds to my experience before I became a full-time writer—is that it's better to have frequent short periods of writing (ideally at fixed times of day) rather than save up for a single uninterrupted block of several days or a couple of weeks. The single block becomes too daunting, when you know you have to write or else!

Still, some writers can work like that, which is fine. Do what you do! Just don't feel that you ought to. It's the poetic version of the writerly life, frenzied periods when the words just pour out of you. However, most professional writers I know don't work like that. For me, learning to work in a different way was part of the process of overcoming writer's block.

Routine and habit don't sound very glamorous, but if the inspiration is there in you, who cares how it gets out onto the page? Slow release or fast release, it's all the same in the end.

2. Writing Through

(ii) OVERNIGHTING

Most writers of long fiction probably wish for a regular time of day to start writing; what's not so obvious is the value of a regular time to stop. When you're in the flow, naturally you want to keep going and make the most of it. But if you use up all your momentum, what's going to get you back into the flow tomorrow morning?

Like I said, the inspiration behind a novel is far bigger than one day's writing. It won't get lost just because you carry it over. It can lurk quietly in the back of your mind while you spend the rest of the day on other things.

One writer I know deliberately cuts off short in the middle of a paragraph, so that he's got an immediate launching pad for the next day's work. I've read that the famous playwright, Henrik Ibsen, used to break off in the middle of a sentence! Extreme—but you get the idea. Instead of writing yourself into exhaustion, you make yourself a cliffhanger for tomorrow's work.

Henrik Ibsen feeling grumpy after forgetting that half-sentence

I used to set myself a fixed time in the early afternoon to down tools. Frustrating in the moment, but a great incentive for wanting to get going the next day. It's not so important now, when my writing habit is well established, but it was very important when I was struggling against writer's block.

The other side of the coin is that I don't like to be away from work too long. I can skip a day or two here and there, but for me the ideal is to write every day without weekends or holidays.

If I have a long break, the story and world start fading from the back of my mind. After a fortnight away, it's like starting from scratch all over again—agony! The very worst kind of Monday-itis! I'd rather go without holidays!

2. Writing Through

(iii) PRE-FILMING

I'll keep this short. It's a practice that works for me, but I've never heard of any other professional writer who uses it. I call it pre-filming—pre-filming, then sleeping on it.

After I stop work in the early afternoon, I spend a couple of hours on other tasks, as far away from writing as possible. Then, between 4 and 5 o'clock, I come back to mull over the episode I'll be writing tomorrow.

I already know the general outline, but this is a further fleshing-out. What feel and setting? What interplay between the characters? How will the action unfold? After an hour or so, I have a few scribbled notes and a much better picture of what's going to happen.

Then—here's the big secret—I sleep on it. I truly believe in that phrase, sleep on it! The unconscious mind sweeps away the possibilities I've discarded, firms up the possibilities I've opted for, and beds down the whole episode overnight (sorry about the pun!).

In the morning, it's as if what was going to happen actually did happen. All I have to do is write it down!

I've got into the pre-filming habit in the last few years. It's like the carry-it-over principle taken one step further. I had to mention it, but I don't know whether it would work for anyone else.

2. Writing Through

(iv) FROM STATIC TO DYNAMIC

I've owned up to being a planner. Before I start writing, I'm likely to have notes in at least four folders, on Characters, World (history, society, houses, landscapes, etc.), Story and Names. (More on names later.)

When I start writing, there's always a shift across from static notes on Characters and World to dynamic notes on Story. The Story folder gets fatter and fatter, until it divides into three or four folders.

I love the way this happens, because it means that static ideas are realising themselves in particular events. A social practice or feature of landscape has found a place in the narrative sequence; a character's personality has turned into a particular saying or doing.

The Story notes change too, from a laid-out plan to a series of glimpses ahead. Closest and clearest is the episode I've pre-filmed for writing tomorrow—that's fully fleshed out.

Further ahead is the wave or phase of action that the episode belongs in—maybe material for 20, 30, 40 pages. It's starting to fall into shape and sequence, but it's still not firm or locked in.

Beyond that lie waves or phases that are more nebulous again. It's like looking ahead in a mist, waiting for hints and glimpses to solidify in the car headlights. I'm always staring forward, eager to make sense of what's coming. But not prematurely. The story a hundred pages ahead ought to be blurred and indefinite.

Footnote: I have my folders, and I also have notes on different colours of paper written in different colours of pen. I like cutting out bits of notes, re-assembling them and stapling them onto A3 sheets. Rituals, rituals! Maybe it's an attempt to impose order on chaos. All I know is that every writer develops his or her own rituals, and every writer risks getting hamstrung by them. What do you do when your green-colour pen goes missing? Rituals are okay, so long as you don't let them get on top of you.

LUCKY PENS

LUCKY PAPER

LUCKY CAT

LUCKY CONTRACT

2. Writing Through

(v) CREATING INTO A SPACE

There's the kind of free-flowering inspiration that sets up a novel in the first place—if you didn't love that part of the business, you'd hardly want to be a writer of genre fiction. But there's also a more difficult kind of inspiration when you need to produce something to fill a space.

For example, some scenes are practical necessities, even though your story has no immediate use for them. For example, buying a ticket in order to travel, putting on armour before a combat. Or, you have amazing dramatic ideas for event A and event C, but you can only move between them by way of scene B. You arrive at these scenes with no idea of how to make them interesting to the reader—or yourself. Here's the toughest test: to create something interesting that also fits a pre-defined space.

What you hope to avoid is the obvious fill-in, the mere bridge. The fact that you didn't originally want this scene should disappear into the history of the making of the novel. By the time you write it and the reader reads it, this scene should be as much wanted as any other scene. It should have become so interesting that you'd be eager to write it even if the rest of the novel didn't exist.

I believe that everything in a novel should be loved and wanted for its own sake. Or—nothing in a novel should be there in the service of some purpose outside itself. That's my mantra, and I'm sticking to it.

So how do you get an inspiration that fits a pre-defined space? I couldn't say where ideas come from in the first place, so I can't answer this one either. All I know is that something always comes if you hold your mind open. Trawl around, like a net in the sea, and wait. Patience is a virtue!

2. Writing Through

(vi) GETTING STUCK

When I was wallowing in long-term writer's block, I used to blame myself for lack of will and drive and determination. I gave myself the guilts and sank into a deep dark hole. Maybe I deserved it for setting my standards too high, instead of writing through and learning from feedback. But I definitely blamed myself too much.

I still get stuck, but I no longer give myself the guilts about it. It's happened before and I've overcome it before. Most of all, I've learned that the problem usually isn't in me, but out there in the world of the narrative. When I get stuck, the story is trying to tell me something.

I believe a story has its own logic, which can't be bent into shape by the mere will of an author. When you can't make something happen, it's not necessarily your fault. Rather, the story won't let it happen. That's when it's time to back off and listen to what the story's telling you.

Usually, I find that the problem is bigger than just the episode I keep blocking on. On the other hand, it's nowhere near as big as the whole novel. A time to back off is also a time to regain a sense of proportion.

Some writers I know can jump ahead and start writing again at a later stage of the novel. Fine if you can do it, though I never can. You pull yourself out of the immediate hole and realise that your overall story-arc is still good, still inspiring.

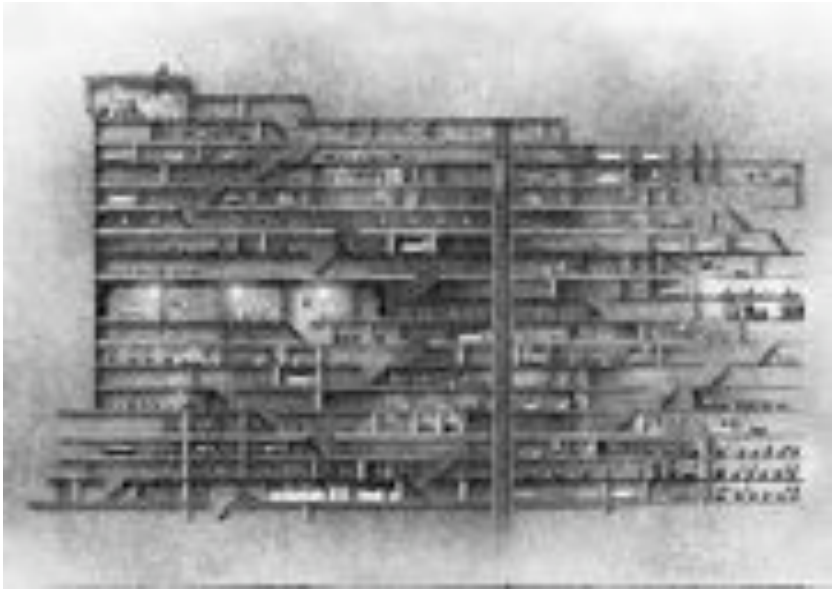
I get the same psychological uplift by planning ahead. I look forward to some of the misty areas that haven't yet come clear, and work on firming them up. Soon I recover my confidence: the basics are right and there are great developments ahead. Very re-affirming!

Then I'm ready to go back, take a fresh look at the problem and deal with it.

(vii) FACE UP TO IT NOW

Every novel creates its own unique pitfalls. I used to think that, with experience, I'd be able to get everything right first time and hardly need to revise. No such luck. I avoid many of the old pitfalls, I'm sure, but I still find new ones to drop into.

One general principle I've learned is that the parts I shirk are the parts that come back to bite me. OK, I tell myself, there's a weakness in motivation here, but I think I can just about patch it over … OK, I haven't really developed the social side of Upper Decks life on the juggernaut, but the main focus on Col's personal story should be enough to carry it off … No, not OK!



The Upper Decks of the juggernaut Worldshaker

The issue I don't deal with typically resurfaces further down the track. Sometimes it'll bring the story to a grinding halt, sometimes it lies lurking until readers and editors point it out.

The case of Col and the juggernaut comes from *Worldshaker* again. My excuses to myself about the lack of social life didn't wash with readers and editors. In the end, I had to go back and do the hard yards!

If you judge some part of your novel as good enough rather than good, that's the part that'll haunt you. You may as well face up to it now!

3. Feedback & Revision

Aileen, my wife and first reader (who actually prefers crime fiction)

(i) YOUR READERS ARE YOUR NOVEL

Genre fiction is built upon reader reactions. Whether it's shock, horror, laughter, grief, suspense, the emotion isn't there in the words alone, but in the meeting between reader and words. Perhaps a literary novel can be beautiful solely for its language, perhaps a purely realistic novel can ask nothing from the reader except a capacity to observe. But genre fiction has to reckon with, and cooperate with, the reader's capacity to feel.

So it's no use saying 'But there is suspense in that scene, because I put it there.' Sorry. If your readers aren't experiencing it, it isn't there. The reader completes the circuit—or not. If not, then the failure is yours.

Of course, every individual reader's capacity to feel is different. When you look for feedback, you wouldn't want to trust to the response of just one reader. All kinds of accidental inputs can influence a single reading. But if you're hearing the same response from more than one reader, you need to act on it.

I have a Ten Sample Readers policy. I try to get ten readers to give me feedback on an MS, preferably readers who belong to the category of readership I'm aiming at. If two or three readers out of ten are dissatisfied with some aspect of the novel, that's too many. Or one editor and one reader … The only time I'd ever doubt an editor's advice is if every single sample reader felt and said the opposite.

3. Feedback & Revision

(ii) FEEDBACK FROM ORDINARY READERS

Different types of reader give different types of feedback, all useful if you know how to interpret and make the most of them.

Ordinary readers with no connection to the writing business are the basic touchstone. Better if they're not friends who'll want to like your book even before reading it, and who'll probably pull their punches after reading it. Ordinary readers with no

connection to the writing business or yourself are the audience you're ultimately trying to reach.

From ordinary readers who aren't friends, you can expect genuine responses, but usually not very articulate ones. Ordinary readers may feel negative about a particular scene or character without knowing exactly why. They may not even recognise a source of dissatisfaction until you start probing them about it.

So, yes, you do need to probe. As soon as a query surfaces with one reader, you need to check it out with every reader. Ditto your own queries. Wherever there's a problem, try to dig down to the root of it.

Above all, don't try to prove yourself right. A reader may have failed to absorb or understand something that's there in your words, but the failure may be significant in itself. Maybe you weren't clear enough, maybe you did something contradictory elsewhere. A misunderstanding that occurs once is a problem for the reader; a misunderstanding that occurs more than once is a problem for the writer.

3. Feedback & Revision

(iii) FEEDBACK FROM OTHER WRITERS

Other writers give another kind of feedback, less reliable but valuable for other reasons. It's less reliable because other writers are always liable to want to write their own book instead of yours. They leap off along lines of possibility, then feel frustrated when you follow a different line.

The great virtue of writers' feedback is the flip side of the same coin—it can open your eyes to alternatives. Writing through a novel, you have to convince yourself that things happened in exactly this way and no other. That's a necessary part of believing in the reality you invent. But when your way isn't working out, you need to escape from your self-imposed spell.

Things could have happened in a different way, and other creative minds are great at discovering those ways. You may not follow anyone's particular suggestion, you may end up developing an alternative of your own. Still, someone has to help you open up that headspace in the first place.

Critique groups of other writers are very useful, and there are plenty of them around. You need other writers on the same rung of the ladder as yourself: published or practised or beginners. Everyone should have a similar 'standing' and a similar confidence or nervousness about making and receiving critiques.

You also need writers with social skills and tact! Real criticism doesn't have to be delivered like a blow to the head. The members of the group should be aware of, and take care of, each other's feelings.

3. Feedback & Revision

(iv) FEEDBACK FROM EDITORS

Feedback from editors (and publisher's readers) is different again. These are professionals who don't quite read like an ordinary reader, spending time with a book for sheer personal pleasure. Keeping one eye on the market, they read to some extent on behalf of other people.

The special power of editors is that they can articulate their responses. They not only latch onto a source of dissatisfaction, they can explain what's going wrong and, often, how to put it right.

You can disagree and negotiate with your editor over revisions. You could probably reject almost every suggestion if you wanted to. But you'd be a fool to want to—and not merely because your publisher will be less eager about your next novel. Your editor deserves your respect. She knows what she's talking about!

Okay, it could happen that you end up with an editor who's completely out of sympathy with what you're trying to do. I've heard of cases, when the wheels of publishing houses rotate personnel. I've always been lucky myself. An editor in sympathy with what I'm trying to do who can also explain what's going wrong when I don't manage to do it—how good is that? I'd be mad not to take advantage.

3. Feedback & Revision

(v) RE-PRIORITISING

Getting feedback isn't about receiving praise. Don't look for it. Getting feedback is about discovering what works and what doesn't.

If something isn't working, of course you need to act on it. But you may also want to act on what is working.

When you're writing through, you're so close to your story that you can be as blind to your successes as your failures. You need someone else to show you the wood for the trees. A particular character has really taken off, a particular narrative twist is so effective. Not that other parts of the story are weak, but those parts are outstanding.

Shakespeare re-prioritizes

Here's where you may want to re-prioritise and give more weight to a particular character or narrative twist or whatever. Perhaps more build-up to the twist, perhaps more interest directed upon this character in the thought and speech of others. Let your successes have their full value!

With short stories, priorities are especially important. Whereas a novel allows room for the free development of many characters and narrative angles, a short story is much more focused. Minor notes have to be ruthlessly subordinated to the major note—a revelation, an insight, a single turn of events.

Feedback from readers/other writers/editors can help you locate that major note and make it ring out loud and clear. Perhaps it emerged only late in the process of writing, perhaps you never realised how crucial it was, perhaps you muffled it in the telling. All of those things keep happening to me—the muffling most of all! When I revise a short story, there always seems to be some re-prioritisation involved.

3. Feedback & Revision

(vi) TAKE CHANGES ON BOARD

Constructive criticism is still criticism. Nobody enjoys being on the receiving end of it. Even when you've had a nagging suspicion that improvements were possible and desirable, the natural first reaction is always an inward groan.

You need to pass beyond that groan. Revision is a challenge to your powers of lateral thinking—take up the challenge! Get those creative juices flowing in new courses!

Does that make it sound too easy? But I used to be the world's worst reviser, resisting every change. I had to be dragged kicking and screaming to the revision process. I haven't forgotten how hard it can be. Believe me, if I can reform, anyone can!

There are two kinds of poor revision. I've only been guilty of the first, which is begrudging revision. Begrudging revisers do the minimum to keep people happy. They accept the need, but deep down they don't believe in it or don't feel good about it. The end result is a patchwork job, where the changes look lumpy and not well blended in.

The other kind of poor revision is passive revision. Passive revisers put themselves completely into someone else's hands. They believe in what they're doing, but they trust their editor, for example, to tell them everything that needs to be done, without thinking through implications and ramifications for themselves. The end result, again, is lumpy changes, not well blended in.

Taking changes on board means not only believing in them, but also making them your own. No reader, not even a professional editor, can foresee the far-flung consequences of a particular change. Only the writer, who has lived through the production of the story from start to finish, can be aware of all the implications and ramifications.

It's a pity that editors always minimize the difficulty of revisions. 'Only a few small changes here and there, you'll deal with them easily.' It's said with the best of intentions, but—memo to editors—you might do better to use reverse psychology on us! Tell us, 'Look, these are huge revisions, and you'll struggle to carry them out.' Then we can feel positive relief when we look at what's suggested. 'Yes, it's a big ask, but I can do it! I really can make it work!'

3. Feedback & Revision

(vii) REVISION THAT ESCALATES

Every novel is a tapestry woven from a million threads. Move one a little this way or that, and you have to make changes leading up to it, changes flowing out from it. Even local revisions spread out as soon as you try to merge them in smoothly.

The most daunting kind of revision is when you yank at one particular thread and the whole fabric starts to unravel. Every solution causes a larger problem somewhere else; alternatives multiply uncontrollably.

It's scary, but it can also be invigorating. When you get over the initial panic, you may find that the unravelling has opened up possible new connections and stronger

story angles elsewhere. It's a win-win situation when one improvement makes space for another.

I admit, I like to do more revision than I'm asked for. If I can add improvements to improvements, I feel I'm back in charge again. Very mollifying to my bruised creative ego! I dive into revision in a totally positive frame of mind.

I dive in at the first page of the novel and work all the way through to the last. Some writers I know can jump back and forth, revising here and there. When I try that, I lose track of motivation, I leave threads dangling.

I prefer to gather up all the revisions that are worth making, then re-write and re-live the whole story chronologically. That way, I know I'm taking everything into account—including the wispy implications I've never consciously thought about.

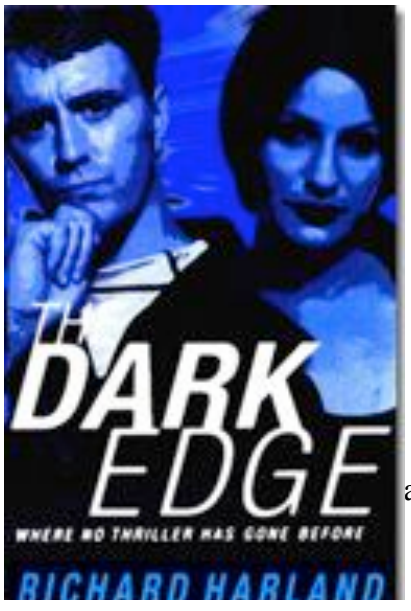
3. Feedback & Revision

(viii) KILLING YOUR DARLINGS

It was William Faulkner who coined the phrase killing your darlings, and Stephen King repeated it. Brutal but true! The best bit of writing in the world may not be best for this particular novel. Give it the push!

It's hard when you're starting a writing career. First-novel syndrome is the tendency to pack every good idea you've ever had into your first novel. You just can't bear to leave anything out.

I did it with *The Dark Edge*, which was actually my second novel, but the first one published by a mainstream publisher. I still regret the park-of-diseased-plants scene in Part IV, Chapter 3—not because it's not good, but because it's nowhere near as good as it should have been. The trouble was, it could only feature as one of several things going wrong on Planet P-19, and the narrative development didn't leave much space to fit it in, So there it is, squashed into a single chapter … and wasted.



There are some wonderful ideas that just don't belong in the particular novel you're writing. Ask yourself: is the novel as a whole better by having this idea in it? is the idea better by appearing in the context of this novel? If there's no mutual enhancement, then maybe this darling needs the Stephen King treatment.

and

The great thing about having a few novels under your belt is that you realise every good idea finds its true home in the end. You don't have to shoehorn it in where it only half-belongs. Sooner or later, you'll write another novel where it can flourish to its full potential.

When an editor suggests cutting some good idea out of a novel, naturally you want to spring to its defence. It's like your own child. But a truly good idea is a sturdy and flexible organism. It won't die from not being used---and you'll be amazed how well it can adapt to new surroundings!

3. Feedback & Revision

(ix) AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

When I revise, there are always some areas for improvement, even if no one has identified a problem. Going through the novel from first page to last, I take these improvements in along the way.

For a start—there's the start. The original version was a stab in the dark. Now, with the benefit of hindsight, I know where everything's going, I can see exactly what needs setting up when. The opening fifty pages of a novel are crucial, and most writers I know expect to re-work and improve them.

Then there are the passages of action. I see ways of making the sequence of movements cleaner and stronger, so that the reader can really see them. Of revisions that I do off my own bat, I probably revise action more than anything else.

With passages of description, as when describing a setting, my revision is mostly trimming. I've almost always used too many words and thrown in too many details. Working over it again, I pare description back to the essentials.

As for dialogue, well, it's either right or it isn't. No use fiddling about with small improvements. If I need to revise dialogue, I set the old passage aside and write through in a flow, as if for the first time. I'm not a fast writer generally, but dialogue has to be written fast and continuously.

Action, setting and dialogue are three of the four Elements in the next section.

THE ELEMENTS

Sub-sections & Pages

1. Action

i) ONE ACT AT A TIME

If you're writing in a popular genre, you have to be good at action. We live in an action world, though movies and TV, and you want those dramatic visual effects. But sentences don't work like images, and a writer can't just make like a film director …

Sentences concentrate our attention on one act at a time. Watching a movie, we can see the first warrior thrusting with his sword, while his opponent pivots to parry, while a third warrior rushes up from behind, while a whole battle goes on in the background. In a movie, multiple goings-on can all be present at the same time. But language is successive, not simultaneous.

Sometimes, the writer's only answer is to back off and announce that 'Everything happened in the same moment' – then list what happened. For example

> No need for the warning. Riff had been waiting for this very move. She pushed Col aside and burst into action.
> Everything happened in a split-second blur. As Col sprawled sidewards, Riff kicked off in a great leap across the opening. Scarface tried to skid to a halt—too late. He slid off the edge of the grille …

It'll do when there's no alternative, but you wouldn't want to be doing it too often. Mostly, you want to massage your action so that it doesn't need to be simultaneous.

In the battle scene, for example, the first thing to forget is the whole battle as a background. Maybe you could set up a moment for an overall impression, e.g. first warrior gets knocked to the ground, lies half-stunned and out of it, becomes aware of everything going on all around. But you can't run the whole battle scene at the same time as the close-up action. The thrust-and-parry stuff is more than enough to focus on by itself.

As for the third warrior rushing up, well, maybe you could slip in an unplaced cry: 'Hang on, Alaric!' But basically you need to wait until he gets involved and breaks in on the main combat.

As for the main combat, this is where you need to play the choreographer. As per the next page ...

ii) ACTION CHOREOGRAPHY

'Choreography'—I mean, arranging action into stages. Not all at once, not random and chaotic, but one thing visibly following on from another, unfolding out of another.

You know that special effect in movies when the camera goes into slow-mo, stretching out the time of an action many times longer than real time? A special effect where everything happens with a strange sort of deliberate lucid inevitability. That's a trick a film director can pull only occasionally, but you can do it easily and often in words.

Sentences don't correspond to the real time of the events they describe anyway. Rapid events don't have to be told rapidly. You can make them seem rapid, but that's different to the time it takes to actually read the words they're told in.

In the slow-mo effect, everything becomes amplified and significant, we foresee consequences before they happen, each tiny twist and turn balances on an agonising knife-edge. Second warrior avoids first warrior's sword thrust by a hairsbreadth; the swords clash at just such an angle that drives first warrior's sword down; he stumbles, knee bending, pebbles rolling under his feet – we're aware of it ALL.

That's what I call taking advantage of what language can do. Writing action, much of the time you feel you're floundering along behind the greater powers of the visual media. But the slow-mo effect, or 'grand action', is one thing that language does better.

1. Action

iii) SPACE & MEASUREMENTS

Think of a duel with rapiers. Everything depends upon the exact angles of arms and legs, the exact angle of the blades, upon all of those angles in combination. A fractional twist of the wrist here, a millimetre of overreaching there. A professional could watch a real-life duel with interest for half an hour. A movie audience could watch a duel on the screen with interest for at least a dozen thrusts, back and forth. But a description of thrust after thrust after thrust in a novel? I don't think so.

Our eyes take in distances and spatial relations instantly, but reading doesn't work that way. Exact spatial relations can be a curse for the writer.

Consider left and right. The pictures that form in my imagination are very unreliable about left or right. If I read that someone kicks out with their left foot, there's a good chance I'll imagine it with the right. I know that left is the opposite of right—so if the character kicking out with the left foot then receives a bruising blow to the right thigh, I'll picture it on the opposite side. But that's the limit of my reliability.

Or what about measurements? The difference between rapiers making contact 5 centimetres or 6 centimetres from the hilt may be crucial to rotating an opponent's wrist, gaining a crucial advantage for the next thrust—and you could see just how it happens on the screen. But words can't convey it—let alone the difference between a rapier raised 5 degrees or 10 degrees above the horizontal.

I don't think this is just me, because I'm generally good with real-life spatial relations—with maps and directions and stuff.

The fact is that measurement words are stone cold dead in a novel. I'd always prefer to talk in paces rather than metres, handbreadths rather than centimetres. (Metrical units hardly belong in a fantasy world anyway.) Even then, I'd never expect the reader to form exact pictures. I know there isn't much difference for me between 'twenty paces' and 'fifty paces' when I read.

In the visual media, we can see precise distances and spatial relations with no loss of immediacy. But the equivalent precision in words is abstract and kills off the excitement of an action scene. Precise measurements are best avoided unless you want to convey the mental state of someone who observes their own movements with a weird alienated detachment.

1. Action

iv) FLASH-IMAGES

Here's my theory. The pictures we form when reading can be very vivid, because we create them out of our own imaginations. But they're never full and continuous like a movie, more like flashes of images in a comic or graphic novel.

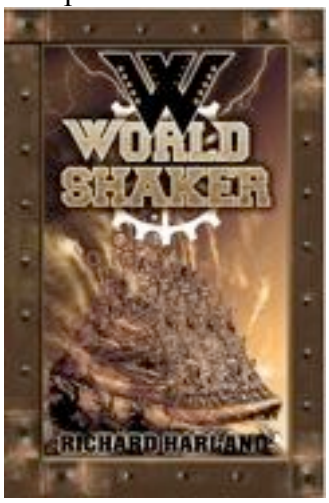
(I've often been told that my novels are very visual, like watching a movie—but I reckon they're more visual like a graphic novel.)

They're also not controllable or adjustable. Imagination throws up a flash, and that's it. I was recently re-writing a dramatic episode where one boat overtakes another in a race on the river. I pictured the two boats as if watching from the left bank of the river—with the faster boat squeezing past very close to the bank. Then I discovered that, for reasons elsewhere, it would be handier to swap the action over to the opposite bank. But I couldn't rotate the image the other way round in my mind! The boats needed to head left-to-right instead of right-to-left, but I couldn't get beyond the way I'd originally pictured it. In the end, I made changes elsewhere.

Same thing with a rapier duel or any other action, I'm sure. We can't switch the angle of our imagination as easily as a director switches camera angle. We're stuck with what flashes up first time.

An advantage comes with this disadvantage. As in a comic or a graphic novel, a writer can make images more intense and more extreme than plain reality. I mean, in the way that a punch in a graphic novel can be exaggerated into a super-punch, a stumble can be exaggerated into a super-stumble.

Similes are a special power of language here. You're not falsifying the action, just superimposing an extra intensity, a second image with added oomph.



In *Worldshaker*, an officer punched in the kidneys 'folded up and collapsed like a concertina'; the Right Honourable Hommelia Turbot 'glided across the lawn like a stately galleon'.

Those aren't staggeringly original similes—I don't go for similes that jump out and announce themselves as poetic writing, breaking the flow of the narrative. Not in non-literary genre fiction anyway. But similes are great for pushing and exaggerating our impression of the action.

v) MEMORABLE ACTION

A duel of back and forth rapier thrusts soon becomes too much, too similar. The best sort of action for describing in words is more distinctive, more memorable.

For example: one duellist, wounded in the leg, has to fight on while standing, perhaps half-kneeling, on a single spot; or one duellist has the rapier flicked from his hand and has to scrabble to re-gather it before his opponent can deliver the coup de grace; or one duellist traps and immobilises his opponent's rapier under his armpit.

When I'm trying to make action interesting, I always look to see if the setting can contribute. Where does the duel take place? Perhaps there are low-hanging tree-branches—so much you could do with that. Or maybe cloaks discarded and lying on the ground—further action possibilities. Or a rising sun that might dazzle the eyes …

The more unusual the setting, the easier for the author to generate unusual developments in the action. There's just one qualification: the setting has to be already present and in place. You can't go suddenly discovering low-hanging tree-branches only when the action needs them. It's a bad look!

Film directors aim to make action distinctive and memorable too, and they've repeated many of the most obvious bits of business so many times they've turned into clichés. Maybe you thought that about my example of someone scrabbling to re-gather a weapon, rolling aside just as the opponent's blow slices down? Yeah, it summons up memories of a hundred movies.

The only saving grace is ... chunking ->

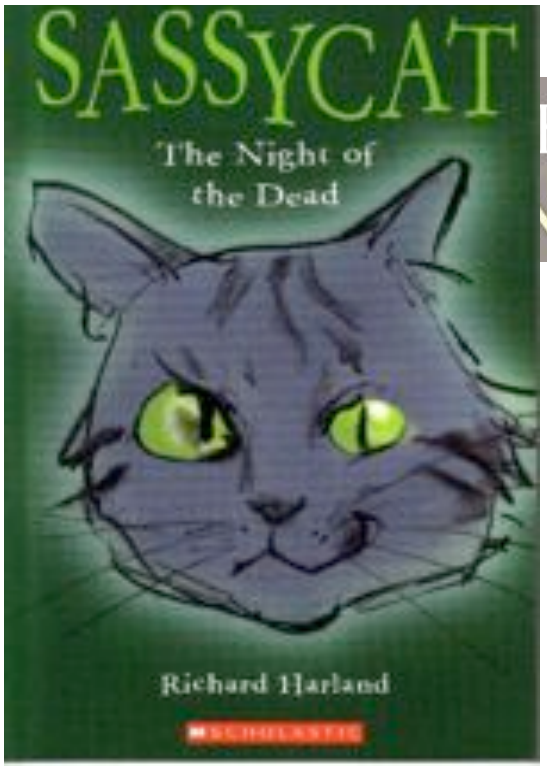
1. Action

vi) CHUNKING

Chunking is a word I use to myself, but it's not easy to explain. It's when you draw a lot of small, bitsy incidents into a single large development.

Maybe the best way to get into it is with an exercise I use in creative writing workshops. I set up a scene; get everyone to suggest possible bits of business; then we work all together to chunk those bits into a single development.

Usually, I borrow a scene from one of my own books (because it's easier—and helps promote the book!) For example, the ghosts-in-the-bedroom scene in *Sassycat*, where Rebecca sees flat shapes like shadows approaching, jumps into bed and hides under the sheets. What next? Here are few possible bits of business:



- the air turns cold
- there's a mouldering, musty-earth smell
- the shapes run down the bedroom wall like black paint
- Rebecca buries her head under her pillows

That's only a fraction of the possibilities people will come up with – but let's keep it simple. Now for some chunking.

> Rebecca under the sheets smells a musty-earth smell—what is it?
> So she peeks out and glimpses something on the wall.
> The more she looks, the more she's afraid of what it might be, but she has to know too.
> So she sits up in bed for a better look.
> And discovers it's the same shapes she saw before, running down the wall like black paint.
> At the same time, by sitting up, she realises that the air's become unnaturally cold.
> She plunges back under the sheets and buries her head under her pillows.

There could be many others ways of making one thing lead to another, equally good or better. What matters is the general principle: to work bits of business together rather than play each to the max on its own.

Here's another example. Talking about memorable action in a duel, I suggested that:

- one duellist, wounded in the leg, has to fight on while standing or half-kneeling on a single spot
- one duellist has the rapier flicked from his hand and has to scrabble to re-gather it before his opponent can deliver the coup de grace
- one duellist traps and immobilises his opponent's rapier under his armpit

Chunking them together, we could have:

- Duellist A traps B's rapier under his armpit and twists, ripping it out of B's hand
- Do duellist B goes scrabbling to re-gather it, snatches it up just in time
- But B still takes a terrible cut to the leg, so that he can only fight on half-kneeling.

Not so clichéd? The scrabbling-for sword-on-ground and rolling-aside get absorbed into a larger arc of action, and this larger arc of action at least hasn't been done a hundred times before.

I guess this is choreography on the other side: not having a knot of action that you need to unfold by stages, but having many bits of action that you turn into a single unfolding. It's something I always look to do where I can.

1. Action

vii) WHEN TO CUT OR SKIM

Sometimes I picture a great piece of action, but when I come to write it out, it takes too many words. The complications becomes too fussy, slowing the momentum, more trouble than they're worth.

I regularly find ways to improve action by making it stronger and clearer, getting a better, sharper sequence of movements. I revise action more often than dialogue or description or anything else.

Consider the case of helping someone climb to the top of a wall. Simple? Not when you try to set down all the acts and coordinations involved. For example:

> Paddy takes up a position with his back against the wall.
> He makes a cradle of his hands.
> Megan puts her left foot into the cradle.
> She hoists herself upwards, gripping his shoulders for balance.
> He raises the cradle of his hands, while she raises her right foot and scrambles to step on his shoulder.
> She brings her left foot up onto his other shoulder.
> She stretches and gets her elbows over the top of the wall.
> He shifts position again, and pushes her up further with his hands against the soles of her feet …

Whoa! Is it really that important to the story? If it is, then fine, go into slow-mo. But if getting up on to of the wall is only on the way to the important things that Megan sees or does from the top, then better to cut it short.

In this case, there's the handy word 'boost'.

> Paddy gave Megan a boost up to the top of the wall.

But if the word 'boost' didn't exist, it might be simpler to have Megan scale the wall by herself.

Another possibility is to skim over the action with dialogue:

> 'I'm going to look out from the top,' said Megan. 'Help me up.'
> Paddy nodded. 'Okay. Give me your foot.'
> 'Hold steady now.'
> 'Push!'
> 'Higher. I'm nearly there.'

Dialogue is a way of lifting out of the action, while giving some indication of what's going on. Perhaps the reader will form the exact picture you hoped for. Or if not, well, at least Megan has got to the top of the wall, in place for the important action.

Interior thinking can work in a similar way. Here's an example from *Worldshaker* –

THE JUGGERNAUT, *WORLDSHAKER*

> [Col] exploded like an unbound spring. First Lumbridge: a straight sharp jab to the nose that made him yelp. Then Haugh, then Prewitt, then one of the boys from 5A. Punch after punch struck home, to jaw, to groin, to kidneys. He kept at arm's length, poised and spinning on his toes. He felled the other 5A boy with a kick behind the knees, he swung Fefferley by the arm to crash against Melstruther.
> It was as though everything had fallen into place. Once he threw himself into non-stop fighting, he was caught up in the rhythm, his timing was perfect. He didn't need to remember about watching for intentions in his opponents' eyes—he just did it. He didn't need to decide about different punches for

> different targets—his body decided for him. He was like Riff herself, in a trance of sure-footed motion.
> Their canes only made them clumsy. They missed him and ended up hitting the furniture—or their fellow-attackers. Col snatched Flarrow's cane from his hands and poked him in the chest with it.

The first paragraph describes a sequence of acts; the second paragraph lifts out of the action but still gives an impression of what's going on; the very last sentence comes back to a particular act.

(More on this in relation to Pacing)

1. Action

viii) SOUNDTRACK EFFECTS

I like throwing bits of speech into action scenes quite apart from skimming. I think they add excitement—and the more fragmentary the better.

> 'Now!'
> 'Faster!'
> 'Don't do that!'
> 'Hey!'

I'll go for sound effects too, usually in italics. Here are a few from *Worldshaker*:

> *swoosh!*
> *clack!*
> *Twang! Twang! Twang!*

Maybe it's my comics mentality coming out, but I learned the habit ages ago from a story my stepdaughter wrote in primary school, full of sound effects. She's on to something there, I thought. That really works!

I suppose I'm coming close to what would be on a film soundtrack. I said before that, as writers, we need to go for effects that work in language, rather than the absolute visual immediacy of film. But bits of speech are language, and sound effects are sort of language-able.

This is a kind of immediacy we can borrow from film—so why not?

Richard Harland's WRITING TIPS

1. Action

ix) IMPACT BEFORE UNDERSTANDING

When action is dramatic and exciting, it's natural to use non-sentences and fragmentary language.

> A piercing scream!
> A dazzling light!
> Instant hubbub!
> No answer.

You wouldn't want to do it all the time, but it's a great option whenever something impacts suddenly upon your characters. The impact of the scream before we or the characters know who uttered it, the impact of the light before we or the characters know where it's coming from.

It makes sense in terms of the way we experience things. Our first recognitions are vague and non-specific: something hit us, something shot past, some kind of sound rang out. It takes a second to absorb what we saw and heard, to work out what it actually was.

Here's a more elaborate example from Book 1 of *Wolf Kingdom*:

> 'Aim for the arms and legs!' roared the officer.
> Even as the words percolated into Nina's mind, a shining shape of metal crashed into the rock-face near her hand. The head of a pike! They were hurling their pikes at her!

Impact before understanding; first the fragment(s), then the full sentence(s). When you want to convey the immediacy of experience, this is the sequence to follow.

1. Action

x) PREPOSITIONS

Prepositions! I love 'em! And so does the English language. What other language makes such a habit of putting prepositions after verbs?

and

‘Strike out’, ‘lift up’, ‘swing round’ …The verb tells the action, but the preposition adds extra oomph. I think of prepositions like the whoosh-lines in comics and graphic novels that convey the speed of the fall, the force of the blow, etc.

Look at it logically and, yeah, you could often leave out the prepositions and still communicate the same content. ‘They lift up the massive beam’, ‘He sat down on the nearest chair’, ‘She swung around to face the sudden sound’ … how could they lift if not up, where could he sit if not down, what way could she swing if not round? A word-paring haiku poet would cut back on prepositions without hesitation. But then word-paring haiku poets aren’t in the business of conveying action.

Something gets lost when you strip out the prepositions. It’s not the content of the action, it’s the feel of it.

> ‘She swung to face the sudden sound’
> ‘She swung round to face the sudden sound’

The preposition is the gesture that puts you inside the movement and makes you live it.

(And even when it’s not a literal action, isn’t there a sort of hidden body language in phrases like ‘think through a problem’, ‘give up on a plan’? I don’t know, but something makes me want to gesture with arms and shoulders as I read!)

There’s a world of power in prepositions! The action writer’s greatest friends!

2. Setting

i) FACTS vs IMPRESSIONS

Once upon a time, a century and more ago, readers expected their novels to describe the setting before the events took place … like laying out the stage before the actors perform on it. So the author would start off with paragraphs, even pages, of static description, locating tables, chairs, windows, etc.

Who knows? Perhaps readers enjoyed reading description for its own sake, or perhaps they had a stronger sense of duty. But not us, not now, no way.

Question. How much do you actually remember about spatial locations? Two chairs on either side on the second window on the left hand wall, a picture on the wall facing the door? Maybe it'll fix in your mind if you're a professional interior decorator. But for the rest of us, it's just smoke and haze.

As for measurements: two metres to the right of the table, etc etc … well, I talked about measurements in the "Space & Measurement" section, and all the same problems still apply.

Don't get me wrong. I think the reader trusts the author to be correct and consistent about setting, and we ought to deserve that trust. Two windows shouldn't turn into three, a picture on one wall shouldn't switch across to another wall. It's a matter of ethics not to be sloppy about such things. But let's not imagine that the majority of readers will actually notice.

What readers nowadays notice aren't the objective facts of the setting—the diagrammatic aspects, as it were—so much as the subjective impressions. It's the feel of the place that's important.

My rule-of-thumb is, what impressions of the scene would still stick in my mind if I thought back on it a year afterwards?

2. Setting

ii) MISE-EN-SCENE

For me, a scene is ready to write when I've got the right feel for the setting. I think it's what people who talk about movies call mise-en-scene. The way I understand it (I could be wrong), mise-en-scene is when a director goes from the bare bones of script/screenplay to a vision of how scenes will actually look. So, for a writer, when an idea of what needs to happen fleshes out into a full picture.

Maybe I'm conscious of this process because of my personal method of 'pre-filming'. But, however you work, the right setting enhances the action. Or if it doesn't enhance the action, I'd say don't bother with it. Description for description's sake is a waste of space.

There are probably no general rules for what setting will enhance what action. Sure, violent action matches violent, stormy weather—and I've done that at the end of *Worldshaker*. But opposites can work well too, violent action set against a genteel setting. My only rule is, if it feels right, it is right.

In *Ferren and the White Doctor*, there's a scene of terrible betrayal, set among green rolling hills in the morning sunshine, green grass dotted with bright scarlet flowers. Maybe I could analyse why green-with-splashes-of-red belongs with that scene, but at the time, it was just a 'click'. Since it's the scene that everyone remembers from the book, I reckon it must click for other people too.

2. Setting

iii) WHAT WOULD YOU PERCEIVE?

There's an exercise I do in creative writing workshops. I outline a scene and setting, then ask -

(i) If you were there along with the characters, what would you see? (a film director's visual effects)
(ii) If you were there along with the characters, what would you hear? (a film director's sound-effects)
(iii) If you were there along with the characters, what would you smell? (the film director can't compete!)
(iv) If you were there along with the characters, what touch sensations would you experience?
(v) If you were there along with the characters, how would you feel?

This is the subjective side of setting. One of my sample scenes is simply walking in underneath a bridge. Here are a few typical responses -

(i) A very sudden switch from daylight to dark.
(ii) An echoing hollowness to every sound.
(iii) Smells might include staleness, mouldiness, rank odours.
(iv) Touch sensations might include the chill of the air and drips of falling water.
(v) Feelings and thoughts might include a sense of cut-off-ness, isolation in an eerie world, the oppressive weight of the bridge overhead.

It's good training to delve deep into your memories and seek out all the details. It's amazing how much you can come up with.

An author prepares to record perceptual experiences

The 'feel' question is especially important because it brings out the essential quality of all good setting—emotional charge. You don't even need to put the emotional charge into words if the details are right.

Dreary; cheerful; secure; disturbing; lonely; bustling … The settings that resonate are more than mere furniture or landscape features. They have an atmosphere that makes them memorable.

Of course, my check-list above is only an exercise. You'd never need to use all the details you can come up with. In practise, you need just enough details to evoke the setting, the most appropriate details for a particular emotional charge. But when you delve deep, you can often discover evocative details that you didn't expect.

2. Setting

iv) DESCRIPTION INTERLEAVED

If setting moves into the foreground—as often in fantasy, where exotic buildings or natural marvels amaze the reader along with the characters—then it's natural to give a whole long block of description. The description is interesting in its own right. But when setting is background, I like to spread it through the action and dialogue—a sentence here, a couple of sentences there, rarely more than a short paragraph at a time.

This keeps the story flowing along and also makes for more evocative description, I think. Brief images and momentary impressions are more vivid than long connected passages. Dust on a table … the delicacy of a gilt-rimmed porcelain cup … a reflection in a puddle—such quick brushstrokes flash unexpected pictures into the reader's mind.

So then you have to find ways of working these snippets of description into the action.

> Dust on the table—when someone leans their elbows on it.
> The gilt-rimmed cup—when someone puts it down with a chink!

The reflection in a puddle—when someone warns, 'Watch where you step.'

Smooth interleaving of setting and action—that's the goal.

Generally, you'd aim to introduce the larger impressions of setting first, the tiny close-up details later.

2. Setting

v) WEATHERS & TIMES OF DAY

When you think about the emotional charge of a setting, then temporary conditions can override permanent conditions. Weathers and different times of day have so much influence on mood and atmosphere. Soft mist … blustery wind … cool blue moonlight … early morning light and long shadows … These are the special flavours that make a scene memorable.

Think of how the same street changes depending on whether you see it drowsing under a midday sun or slick with rain as night starts to fall. The same street may come into your story several times over, but it doesn't have to have the same feel every time. Here's something to take advantage of!

I suppose we often compose a setting with a view to what's needed for the action: a stone bridge over a river, say, with open fields on either side. It can seem an extra burden to then incorporate drizzle or white hoar-frost or afternoon thunder. Groan! It'll mean working in more bits of description and thinking through the consequences.

But it's also an opportunity to create a setting that enhances the action. Even more—it's an opportunity to discover new developments and take the action on new twists and turns. Drizzle can enter into the story and affect what happens. Embrace it, make the most of it!

2. Setting

vi) ADJECTIVES

Adjectives are good for conveying the flavour of things. When you're trying to capture how something would look or sound or feel, it's natural to use words like 'soft', 'blustery', 'cool', 'blue', 'long', 'slick', 'white'. Still, the usual advice is good advice: cut back on adjectives.

It's not that adjectives are weak or inferior parts of speech, it's that most writers—me included—tend to use too many of them. When you're trying to convey the exact flavour of something, it's tempting to keep throwing adjective after adjective at it. Tempting, but counter-productive. Multiple adjectives only weaken one another's impact.

I still use too many adjectives in a first draft, because it's often easier to make a few attempts and come back for a final decision later. If I want an impression of dreariness for a rainy street as night starts to fall, there are various aspects of the street that might work to convey it. So I go in for overkill—then cull ruthlessly when I come back to a second draft.

The only adjective you want is the very best one. As soon as the impression has been captured, move on!

2. Setting

vii) THINKING THROUGH CONSEQUENCES IN FANTASY

Otherworlds in fantasy and SF are a special case of setting. You're not limited to the permanent conditions of our own world, or even similar temporary conditions—you can make up rainbow mist, mud-rain, silvery sunsets. World-creation is one of the special glories of speculative fiction.

The basic principles still apply, though. Whatever you introduce, you have to think through the consequences.

Suppose your world has outcrops of reflective blue stone, hard as diamond. Describing it as a landscape feature is only the first step. You have to ask yourself: what uses would people make of it? (ornaments? spear-tips?) How would it affect farming? or the routing of roadways? Would people build fortifications on the outcrops? or shrines? or leave them deliberately untouched? How would people feel about this special stone? (as something sacred? or something unnatural, to be shunned?) Perhaps it would enter everyday speech in phrases like 'hard as bluestone', perhaps it would serve as a symbol of resolution, courage, tenacity …

The perceptual consequences need thinking through too. How would this bluestone look? (in rain? under torchlight?) How would it sound if tapped? How would it smell? (metallic? or complete absence of smell?) What would it be like to touch? (strangely cold? sharp facetted edges?) And again, how would people feel about it? (a usable resource? an alien presence?)

SF writers are sometimes weak on thinking through perceptual consequences; fantasy writers are probably better on perceptual consequences, but sometimes fall down on practical consequences.

2. Setting

viii) MAKING IT FRESH IN FANTASY

For fantasy authors, the danger is relying on standard pre-established fantasy elements without bothering to make them fresh. I believe it's a plus for a fantasy author to invent something truly original, but I don't see anything wrong with using towers of glass, dragons, half-conscious forests, underground cities, etc etc.—so long as you imagine them from the grass roots up.

That's what's so great about *Lord of the Rings*. No one had ever tried to put traditional elements from myth and saga into the up-close-and-personal form of a novel before (okay, William Morris, but almost no one). So Tolkien couldn't take anything for granted; he had to do it virtually for the first time.

Nowadays, fantasy authors bring a whole huge accumulation of up-close-and-personal novels and films to their writing. But it still matters to do it as if for the first time.

Take a dragon's lair, a treasure-filled cave (leaving the dragon out of it for the moment). Not exactly an original setting, but an author can still come up with fresh details.

How would it look, sound, smell, feel? Maybe there are deep scrape-marks gouged in the rock by the dragon's claws. Maybe a residual smoky smell from the dragon's breath. Maybe a tarry, sooty residue on the treasure where the dragon would rest its jaws. Maybe some precious items of gold and silver have been buckled by the heat of the dragon's chest.

It doesn't matter whether some of those details have been used before, an author can still make them fresh by imagining them as personal experience, as if for the first time. Lazy imagination is second hand imagination; active imagination creates from the grass roots up.

2. Setting

ix) PERMANENT CONDITIONS IN FANTASY

For fantasy and SF writers, there are special pitfalls when setting up permanent conditions that don't exist in our own world. The old foreground-background problem with language rears its ugly head again.

Personal example. In my first SF thriller, *The Dark Edge*, Eddon and Vail arrive to investigate a murder on another planet with heavier gravity than they're used to. What could be more likely? No two planets are likely to have exactly the same gravity.

When the effect was at the forefront of their minds, I reckon I did a good job of thinking through the physical and mental consequences of heavier gravity. Fine for a chapter or two. But then I faced the prospect of another 400 pages of story all set on the same planet.

What would really happen? The newcomers would unconsciously adjust to slower movements and the effects would sink to the back of their minds. But sentences only pay attention—how do you convey what your characters are no longer attending to?

It's a real bind. If you say nothing at all, the reader's imagination will soon revert to default position, that is, the norm of our own world. As with gravity, so with light. You might set up a red sun that casts a reddish tone of daylight, but I swear the reader will forget to imagine it if it's not mentioned for a few chapters.

On the other hand, if you do keep on mentioning it, it'll soon become irritating. Very irritating. Since nothing's worse than nagging the reader, I opted to stop referring to the effects of heavy gravity in *The Dark Edge*. But I wasn't happy about it.

The fact is that some alternative conditions aren't worth the trouble. Tolkien has the Dark Day in LOR, but soon opts to let the sky return closer to normal. It's a great dramatic effect, but too restrictive to maintain as permanent.

I'm not sure about strongly unusual permanent conditions even in movies, which don't have the foreground-background problem. Remember the Arnie movie, *Total Recall*, where the red light of Mars keeps on colouring everything while we focus on the action in the foreground? Except I didn't find it so easy to focus on the action in the foreground. For me, the red light remained a distraction.

I wish there was some brilliant answer to the problem, but my only answer is a deliberate cop-out. Some otherworld conditions are great ideas in themselves, but they're too restrictive if you have to maintain them for the whole length of a novel.

I've become particularly wary of permanent conditions that override temporary conditions. I want to be able to play with varying conditions of light, oppressive weather versus clear crisp weather, etc. Nowadays I only set up permanent conditions that don't interfere with scene-by-scene flexibility.

3. Dialogue

i) THE VIRTUES OF DIALOGUE

In literary fiction, you'll often find page after page of a character's inner thoughts and relatively little dialogue; in genre fiction, it's more likely to be the other way round. A genre writer has to be good at writing dialogue; stodgy dialogue isn't an option.

Dialogue is a natural bridge between internal character and external action. Go deep into a character's thoughts and you tend to leave the action behind. Stay inside someone's mind for a long while and it can come as a sudden jerk for the reader when you switch back to doings in the external world.

Dialogue belongs in the same external world as the action, but it also conveys personality and shows how a character is thinking. Of course, people don't always say what they're thinking, but we're used to reading between the lines. By years of practice, we're all experts at interpreting the implications and motivations behind what other people actually say.

Inner thoughts aren't necessarily the truth, anyway. Don't we often think deceive ourselves, even inwardly, about our real motivations?

Good dialogue does many things at once. It advances the action, it reveals personality and motivation, and it keeps multiple characters in play. Above all, good dialogue is lively and very easy to read. That's what I call value for money!

ii) INTERACTIVITY

You want the feel of authentic dialogue, but the spirit rather than the details. Listen to a cassette recording of yourself talking with friends. Embarrassment! Real life conversations are full of 'um's' and 'er's', hesitations, misunderstandings and unfinished lines of thought.

Okay, it's good to include some of that noise for the sake of realistic flavour. But it would be maddening to have to read through the amount of it that goes on in real life.

Normally, we don't even hear it, we hear through it, like 'noise' on any communication channel. We focus beyond the 'um's' and 'er's', can't even remember them afterwards. Instead, we're aware of what we intended to say, while at the same time reaching out for what the other person intended to say. Here's the secret of authentic dialogue—in that mutual reaching out, that interactivity.

What I mean is that the spirit of dialogue isn't just alternating statements, but alternating agendas and understandings. It's a fencing match, with a common goal of mutual understanding, but also non-common goals such as asserting superior knowledge, withholding embarrassing facts, imposing a favourable perspective, forestalling criticism, etc., etc., etc.

Or like a couple of dogs sniffing each other out! We try to suss out the other person and what they're really saying; and at the same time, we have our own things to say and our own preferred version of ourselves to communicate.

Convey those kinds of interactivity going on, and it hardly matters whether your characters (like Jane Austen's) speak only in full sentences. Your dialogue is alive in the way that real dialogue is alive.

Jane Austen displeased by Mr Darcy's failure to make passionate dialogue

Most writers I know test their dialogue by reading it out aloud. I do. If it bounces along in varying tones, I know I'm getting it right. If it falls into a monotone—start again!

3. Dialogue

iii) QUESTIONS

Here's a cheap trick. If your dialogue lies flat on the page and refuses to perk up, try turning statements into questions. For example:

A: 'I wanted to see Mrs Hallam.'
B: 'She's not in. She's gone to the supermarket.'
A: 'I'll go look for her there.'
B: 'She'll be back in half an hour.'
A: 'Okay, I'll wait for her here, then.'

—becomes—

A: 'Is Mrs Hallam in?'
B: 'No. You want her? She went to the supermarket.'
A: 'Maybe I should go look for her there?'
B: 'What's the rush? She'll be back in half an hour.'
A: 'You think I should wait for her here?'
B: 'Why not?'

That's not the world's most brilliant example, neither for flatness nor perking up. Still, there's surely more back-and-forth bounce in the second version.

When we write prose, we write in statements—and the habit often sticks when we write dialogue. But listen to a real-life conversation, and it's full of questions (along with interjections, commands, etc.) Even tag questions, as when we add 'you know?' at the end of a perfectly self-sufficient assertion—inviting a response, keeping the ball rolling. Increasing the number of questions doesn't necessarily produce good dialogue, but it can be the first stage in overcoming the common disease of statement-itis.

'Yes, gentleman, it's a bad case of statement-itis, I'm afraid.'

3. Dialogue

iv) SWAPPING CONTENT

Here's another trick, not quite so cheap. Try swapping content from one speaker to the other.

A: 'I'll need to catch the 8.30 train to get there in time for lunch.'
B: 'I'll drive you to the station after I've taken the kids to school.'

—becomes—

A: 'I'll need to get there in time for lunch.'
B: 'The 8.30 train then? You want me to drive you to the station?'
A: 'Is that okay? After you've taken the kids to school.'
B: 'No problem.'

Questions popping up again! But the main lesson in swapping material around—and it's only a training exercise—is that a listener is always guessing at what's in a speaker's mind, even while the speaker's still speaking. Here's an exaggerated version—

A: 'I'll need to get there in time—'
B: 'For lunch? So you'll want to catch the 8.30 train?'
A: 'Can you drive me to the station?'
B: 'Should be okay, if—'
A: 'The kids? You'll have time to take them to school first, surely.'

Interruptions are probably something to do in small doses; a long passage of dialogue where everyone kept jumping in on everyone else would soon become jerky and irritating. Nonetheless, it's undeniably alive.

3. Dialogue

v) ADDING SPEAKERS

Here's a test: write a dinner party conversation for eight people, where everyone has different opinions, interests and agendas!

For many years of my writing life, I'd have baulked at that. Anything said can fly off in so many directions, it's like juggling eight balls in the air. Now I relish that kind of challenge—because of the new dimensions that come into dialogue when additional speakers are introduced.

Say you have an intense two-way dialogue, a quarrel with recriminations between X and Y. Bring in Z—and perhaps X and Y have to conduct their quarrel with hidden

barbs, under cover of polite appearances. Perhaps Z senses something anyway, and starts asking questions, or starts trying to smooth over the situation. Or, another possibility—perhaps X and Y turn to Z in self-justification, attempting to win her over to their version of events. Or perhaps X does that, while Y proudly refuses to appeal for sympathy…

The possibilities are only limited by the needs of your larger story. I've learned to enjoy the extra angles I can create by bringing in an extra person, or two, or three. There are times for straightforward dialogue, and there are times for variety and unpredictability.

3. Dialogue

vi) NAMING SPEAKERS

Naming your speakers can be a pain in the butt, especially when you have more than two. With two, you can kick off with a 'P said' and a 'Q said', then rely on the reader to alternate speakers over many lines of dialogue without needing reminders. How long depends mainly on how distinctive the speaking is: the reader won't have a problem if P keeps giving commands while Q keeps refusing to obey. More frequent reminders will be needed if both P and Q are sharing memories of a single past event.

With three or more speakers, you need to name and name again. I used to feel guilty about repeating the word 'said'; then I gave up worrying; and finally felt vindicated when I read Robert Silverberg's advice in Worlds of Wonder (which I recommend for its superb collection of sample stories as well as its wisdom). When you just mean 'said' (he said), then use it; don't strain to find alternatives. 'P said' or 'Q said' are the closest equivalent to a play script:

> AVRIL: Why do you want to know?
> TERRY: Don't you think I have a right to know?

There's nothing wrong with 'he snorted, 'she exclaimed', 'he snapped', as a way of ringing the changes. But if they follow one another line by line, it soon becomes forced and annoying.

The great life-saver in dialogue writing is the action phrase. You don't need to mention actual speaking at all; you can tie a line of dialogue to a speaker by describing the speaker's action at the same time.

> Matt turned to Jen. 'You're crazy.'
> 'It's not just the money.' Will scowled. 'We can't let him get away with this.'

As with anything, you can overdo it. Constant bits of body-language can also look forced, especially since there aren't that many expressions for capturing body-language in the English language. But mix action phrases with 'said's and occasionally other forms of speaking ('growled', 'demanded', 'gasped' …) and you can keep naming your speakers without too much difficulty.

Oh, and I'm forgetting, you can also name a speaker within someone else's speech.

> 'What do you think, Terry?' asked Avril.
> 'I don't see a problem.'

No need to say who's uttering that second line, when Avril's already named Terry.

4. Thinking Inside

i) DIRECT INTERIOR MONOLOGUE

How do you present the thinking inside a character's head? The old-fashioned way was to tell it: 'Henrietta thought Edward extremely ill-mannered, etc', and that's still a possibility—briefly. But not for long passages. Nowadays we want a more direct experience of thoughts, not being told about them from a distance.

Direct Interior Monologue is when you go directly into a character's mind, quoting their verbalised thoughts just as you might quote their spoken words. (I used to teach this stuff when I was a university lecturer. Hmm … I didn't own up to that before, did I? My only excuse is that I always lectured about books more in the style of a writer than an academic!)

Anyway, Direct Interior Monologue developed at the start of the 20th century as a bold new literary experiment. The rationale was that every experience turns into thought, but a sub-verbal stream of consciousness rather than a soliloquy in sentences. So here's James Joyce, reproducing that stream directly onto the page:

> (Leopold Bloom thinks—) This is the very worst hour of the day. Vitality. Dull, gloomy: hate this hour. Feel as if I had been eaten and spewed.
> Provost's house. The reverend Dr Salmon: tinned salmon. Well tinned in there. Wouldn't live in it if they paid me. Hope they have liver and bacon today. Nature abhors a vacuum.

May the Great God of Literature spare me, but basically it doesn't work very well. Of course, no one dares to say so about a literary classic, but the experiment failed as experiments sometimes do.

James Joyce planning torments in Hell for Richard Harland

Stream-of-consciousness interior monologue of this kind has never caught on in fiction at large. Very few writers would try to use it nowadays, and they'd be writers with very few readers.

It's not that the associations are obscure (though they often are), but that this form of direct quotation doesn't do what it's supposed to do, that is, capture the true nature of our inner thoughts. Although our thinking is partly verbalised and partly non-verbalised, it isn't a continuous stream of truncated phrases in this way. It would be hard to say what it is, but not that.

4. Thinking Inside

ii) FREE INDIRECT DISCOURSE

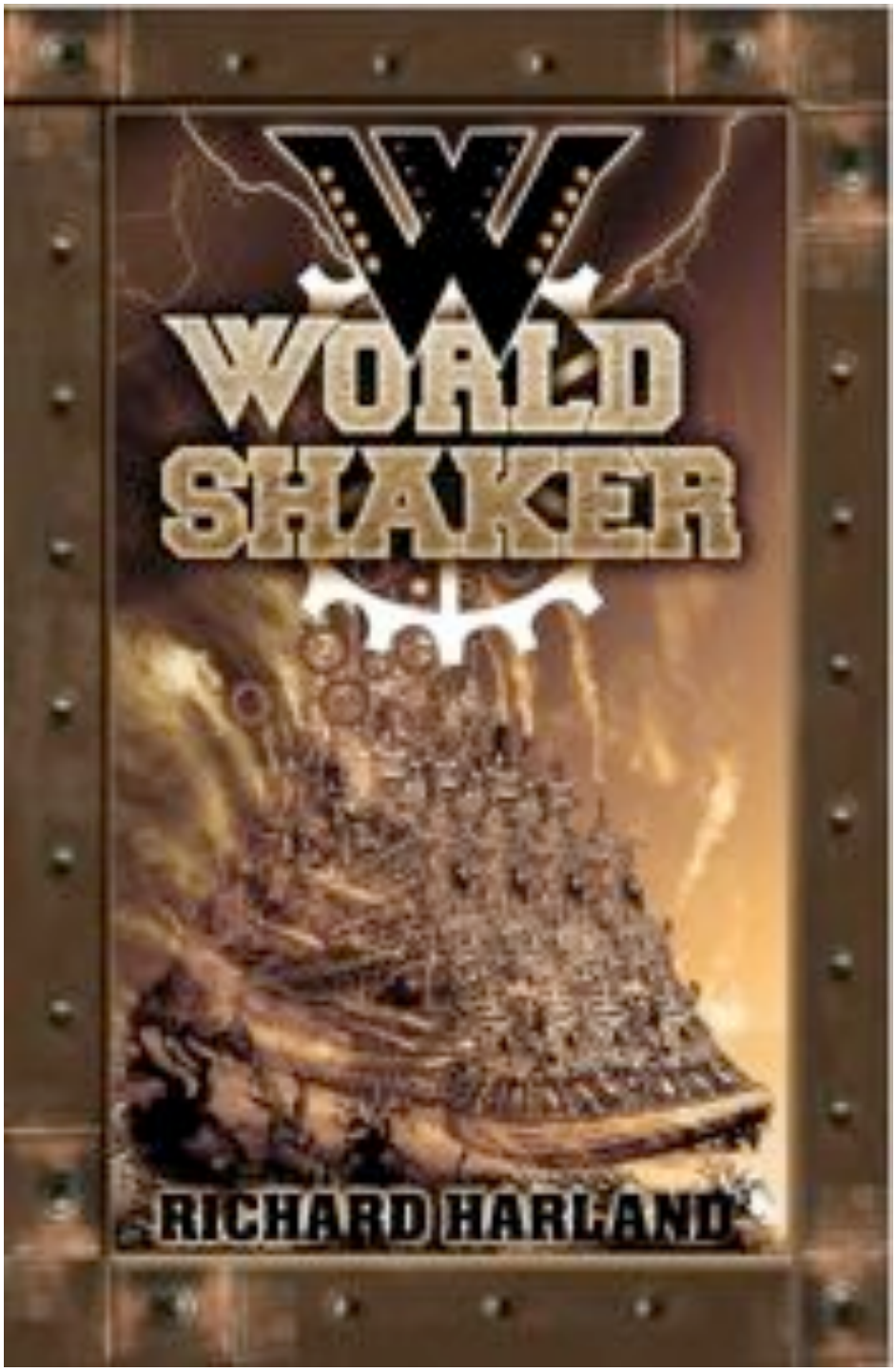
Or FID for short. It's a true academic term, where you'd never guess the meaning from the words alone! There are other terms, but this was the favourite at the time I stopped being a full-time lecturer, twelve years ago. Plus I like the reference to free—that's important.

Free Indirect Discourse evolved slowly from the late 19th century on, but it was never a conscious experiment. It snuck in under the radar without anyone ever theorised a rationale for it. If anyone had tried to theorise a rationale, they'd have surely concluded that it was completely illogical and unworkable.

Here's an example from an early chapter of *Worldshaker*

> (Col has just driven the 'Filthy' girl, Riff, out of his room) Then he removed his shirt and washed his arms and chest … anywhere he might have touched her, even through the shirt.
>
> It was so unfair. Why him? Why now? Just when everything else was going so right in his life, why did this one thing have to go so wrong?
>
> If only she would go back down Below … But the more he thought about it, the more he doubted it was possible. A way to go down would also be a way for Filthies to climb up. Surely the builders of *Worldshaker* would have made sure that couldn't happen?
>
> At least he didn't see her again that afternoon. He had dancing practice with Mrs Landry, followed by foils practice with Mr Bantling, followed by supervised jigsaw puzzling with Mrs Canabriss …

We recognise that this is Col's experience and thinking. 'Why now?' is now because it's in his present; 'this one thing' is this because it's immediate to him; the questions are his questioning. Yet Col features in the third person even though, if he were to fully verbalise his experience, he would naturally think of himself in the first person: not 'Why him?' but 'Why me?'; not 'his life' but 'my life'. And in spite of the fact that all these thoughts are present experience for him, they're given in the past tense—the author's tense.



It shouldn't work, but it does. FID is a half-and-half voice, which gives us the sense of sharing someone's experience without claiming to record directly inside their skull. The proof it works is that you'll find it everywhere in every novel nowadays, both literary and genre.

4. Thinking Inside

iii) SLIDING & GLIDING

The beauty of a half-and-half voice is that it's very easy to glide in and out of a character's experience. In the *Worldshaker* passage I just quoted, 'he removed his shirt and washed his arms and chest' describes Col's actions, which he must be experiencing—but he's not necessarily thinking about them in this way. His actions might be mostly automatic, while his thoughts run along the lines of 'It was so unfair. Why him? Why now?'

'It was so unfair. Why him? Why now?' definitely moves us into his thoughts. This isn't the author's protest (so unfair) and the questions aren't my questions. Using a question is one of the easiest ways of slipping into a character's thoughts; another is using a self-command, e.g. 'He had to stop this before anyone got hurt'; another is using a fragmentary exclamation, e.g. 'Unbelievable!'

There's a more distantly presented moment in the middle of the paragraph: 'the more he thought about it, the more he doubted it was possible.' This is like the author commenting on Col's thoughts, rather than the thoughts themselves.

We're back in Col's thoughts, though, with the very next phrase: 'A way to go down would also be a way for Filthies to climb up'. The focal length keeps shifting, like a constantly adjusted telescope.

This is more than just handy for the author. I believe it also corresponds to the way our minds really work—with constant shifts of focus.

The last paragraph slides away from Col's experience. 'At least he didn't see her again that afternoon,' is more distant ('that afternoon' rather than 'this') and doesn't give us the thought of any particular moment; but it's still filtered through his sense of relief in the phrase 'At least …'

The last sentence moves further away: 'He had dancing practice with Mrs Landry, followed by foils practice with Mr Bantling, followed by supervised jigsaw puzzling with Mrs Canabriss …' Those are things that happen to Col, but not presented as he experiences them.

I wasn't doing any of that deliberately when I wrote those paragraphs, and I wouldn't want to. I'm getting analytical now just to make a point: that you can slide and glide most anywhere with FID. You can move little by little from a character's inner thoughts to that character's actions, to general actions, to events outside the character's direct experience. Eventually, you can even move across to another character's inner thoughts.

The gradations and flexibility of FID are a great blessing. You just have to avoid jumping suddenly between extremes, from a thought that's deep inside a character's experience to something that character obviously couldn't experience. Motto for authors: be subtle and slippery.

4. Thinking Inside

iv) FOCUSED THOUGHTS

I've said I believe our inner thoughts shift focus like changing the focal length of a telescope. I'm sure that shifting focus helps keep a long stretch of inner thinking lively. Statement-itis is a danger in FID, as in dialogue.

We have sudden doubts—so a shift into questions. We conduct arguments in our heads—so jump from one standpoint to another. ('No! It wasn't like that …') And never mere flat reasoning, but fears, guilts, hopes, irritations, self-justifications.

A switch between FID and Direct Interior Monologue can also imitate a shift of focal length. FID is the best general form of presentation, I'm not going back on that, but sometimes you want short sharp realisations jumping to the forefront of consciousness. One nifty way of conveying this is by a sudden shift to first person and present tense.

For example (*Worldshaker* again):

> The moment had passed. But Col had no heart for making small talk any more.
>
> So this is how it will be, he reflected. His future seemed to stretch out ahead in an infinity of wretchedness. He would be always acting a role, while everyone pretended to carry on as normal. He would know what people were really thinking … and they would know he knew … yet nobody would ever speak of it aloud. He was locked into this strange twilight state forever.

So this is how it will be is Direct Interior Monologue. I like to use italics for these short sharp realisations, but it's totally optional.

The same technique works if you want to convey a particularly intense willed thought—the kind of thought that really might be verbalised. When the 'Filthy' girl tells Col, 'You oughter know about the Changing Room, then,' Col thinks

> It was hopeless trying reason with a Filthy. And I shouldn't even be trying, he told himself.
>
> He turned to the door and raised his voice. 'Officers!'

The italicised phrase is in first person 'I' and present tense, unlike the FID phrase before.

The beauty of this switch into Direct Interior Monologue is that you're not stuck with it. Once you've communicated the sudden moment of intensity or awareness, you can slide back into half-and-half FID again. As in 'His future seemed to stretch out ahead in an infinity of wretchedness. He would be always acting a role, while everyone pretended to carry on as normal …'

Again, it's probably contradictory and illogical, but who cares as long as it works?

CHARACTERS

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1. Creating Characters

(i) SOURCES FOR CHARACTERS

There's no easy route to character creation. Learn more about other people and yourself would be good advice, but most of us spend our whole lives trying to do that anyway.

My ideas for characters come from three sources: real people I know; fictional figures in movies or books; and qualities I recognise in myself. Mostly, my characters are amalgams from more than one source—a real person as well as a fictional figure, often more than one real person, more than one fictional figure. And always a bit of myself.

I wish I didn't have to own up about fictional figures, because it sounds as though I'm just borrowing from other writers and creators. I hope it's never just borrowing.

Fictional figures are stimulating because they're so sharp and focused—they help me get a better handle on some real person I know, or something in myself. I get this stimulation from all kinds of fiction, not only books in my own genre of fantasy. Non-fiction too—histories, biographies, documentaries …

When I say get a better handle, I don't mean 'better' in the sense of more accurate. I mean that it helps me to grasp an interesting potential that could fit with that real person I know. I don't care whether it's true to that person or not. I'm writing fiction, not fact.

Sometime, unfortunately, the real person cares if they happen to read what I've written! When a friend or acquaintance recognises an aspect of themselves in a character, it's hard to explain that, no, this isn't the way I see you, only something I've seen as a possibility through you. Probably no explanation will convince—better to lie and deny outright! And change any obvious physical resemblances in the first place.

At the opposite end to fictional figures is one's own sense of self—just too big and vague and wishy-washy to go readily into a suitable size character for a novel. (I'm thinking genre novels, as always, not semi-autobiographical literature.) A real person or a fictional figure or both can serve to draw off some usable part of yourself, can give it shape and definition.

1. Creating Characters

(ii) THE INNER FLAME

So, an outside source to stimulate and inspire—but there has to be some answering echo in you. Something that would never appear in your real-life behaviour, perhaps, but still a potential. The vitality and inner feel of a character has to come from you.

A closely-observed character may be a good character, but a great character is created from the inside out—like the way we actually live our lives. Patterns of behaviour, body-language, manner of speech all flow from that inner flame.

I'm not against observation and recording, but I think it's more relevant to semi-autobiographical writing than genre fiction. I'm not interested in making a copy of real life. (Why bother? Isn't there enough of it around all the time?) What matters in genre fiction is being true to the inner flame.

I enjoy reading and writing characters who are more colourful, more alive, more high-energy than average people in everyday real life. I've moved from the gothic grotesques of *The Vicar of Morbing Vyle* and *The Black Crusade* to more realistic characters in recent projects. But I hope that even my gothic grotesques manage to be 3–dimensional, and my more realistic characters also manage to be vivid and intense.

For me, a caricature is extreme and predictable, whereas a 3-dimensional character may be extreme but is not predictable. 3-dimensional characters interact in new ways and respond to new circumstances; they can grow and surprise. But they can also be crazy, murderous, abject, grandiose, larger than life …

One thing that will always quench a character's inner flame is pre-judgement by the author. If you decide from the start that this particular person is morally or politically wrong, then you lock them into a box. Characters need space to breathe. They need empathy first and judgement later—if at all.

Personally, I like to let readers form their own judgements of approval or disapproval. And, yes, I like to spring a few surprise developments, when seemingly bad characters show a good side, and vice versa. Not because nobody's totally good or bad in real life—if that's your rationale, your characters may just end up bland. A total baddie can work in a fictional world.

No. I like surprise developments because they make for good reading. My goal is to write a novel that takes the reader on an emotional roller coaster ride—which includes changing feelings towards at least some of the main characters.

1. Creating Characters

(iii) PAST BIOGRAPHY

Characters take time to come to life. You can have a great idea for a character, you seem to see him or her clearly in your mind's eye—but you'll only know what you've really got after he or she has been speaking and acting for a few chapters. With characters, you just have to plunge in and hope.

Sometimes a character will develop their own voice, sometimes a side of their personality will light up, sometimes a character will take off so successfully that you have to allow them a bigger role in the story. Other times, a character will lie flat on the page and refuse to move.

Don't give up in a hurry! Some characters are slow starters, and only come alive when you give them the right situations and the right characters to bounce off. You can always rewrite what they say and do in earlier chapters.

But if you get to the point of hardly believing in them yourself, then you've got problems. Here's a trick that many writers use, including yours truly. Write out a biography of his or her life before the novel started.

Ask yourself: what happened to him or her as an infant, in childhood, growing up? What influences, what interests, what sicknesses, what friends? Think it all through in a way that fits with your character in the present. Personality traits are nebulous, but past events are substantial. You can get a grasp on what a character is now by seeing what he or she has grown from.

Then—resist the temptation to load it all into your actual novel. This is an invisible biography for your benefit. If it helps you do your job and create the character in the present, the reader won't need to need to know the full details of the past. A good general principle in writing fiction—and especially fantasy—is: it doesn't all have to go into the book.

1. Creating Characters

(iv) SELF-JUSTIFICATION

Here's another trick that works for me, though I haven't heard of other writers using it. When a particular character isn't coming to life, I halt the story, lower a microphone into his or her head and write out what s/he would say for themselves in an interview.

'Why I did this …'
'Why I'm going to do that …'
'Why I'm right and everyone else is wrong …'

If the biography gives definition to a character, the self-justification gives me the character's inner feel. The reasons and excuses aren't so important, but the perspective is. Self-justification soon becomes self-assertion, answering back against the interviewer.

Doesn't everyone have a way of putting themselves in the right? We shape the world around us and see everything from our own centre. I really believe that's part of being human—we're ultimately un-put-down-able. I love my characters to be ultimately un-put-down-able!

Even apology and contrition can involve a kind of self-assertion. A character may accept the blame and condemn him/herself—but still, he or she is doing the accepting and condemning. It's still an assertion of one's own perspective. 'At least I'm the one putting myself down …'

Writing out a character's self-justification makes me treat them with proper respect. As authors, we rule our worlds, and perhaps there's an element of the control freak in all of us. But it's dangerous to get on top of one's characters, because real living

and

human beings can't be got on top of. They always can recognise what others think of them, they can become conscious of things about themselves—and still answer back.

A good motto for writers: never underestimate your characters. No matter how foolish or blind or unintelligent, they should never be dumb.

The self-justifications I write out for characters don't get into my novels. They do influence a kind of scene I'm very fond of, though—namely, the scene where a character is confronted by the truth about themselves.

What emerges from these moments of self-consciousness is unpredictable: perhaps change and redemption, perhaps sheer wilful persistence—'I am what I am'. (For example, Sir Mormus's self-proclamation at the end of *Worldshaker*.) Either way, a character who rises to self-consciousness is a character who becomes bigger. Even the most whinging petty figure can achieve a kind of tragedy.

1. Creating Characters

(V) SHEDDING & MOVING ON

Characters should have the potential to change, everyone agrees on that. One kind of change is the highly dramatic change I mentioned in the previous section, when someone becomes conscious of the truth about themselves. Other kinds of change are slower, under the influence of new learning and knowledge. The very opposite of dramatic change is change by shedding and forgetting.

I'm thinking of the way we move on from particular periods of experience: bad relationships, sad events, times of triumph, phases of obsession. Sometimes we look back on earlier periods of our life and it truly seems that the past is another country. We've left behind the person who had those experiences.

'Give it time', people say about healing from bad relationships and sad events, and that's so exactly right. Nothing has to happen; the passing of time alone is enough to efface aspects of our lives and personalities.

I suspect that shedding and forgetting is just about the biggest factor in real-life character change. But not in novels. I know I tend to avoid it, especially since my novels usually run over too short a time span, a couple of months at most.

Also, forgetting can't be shown. You can show someone becoming aware of something about themselves, but you can't show them losing awareness. Forgetting past experiences and emotions isn't an event.

Nor can you make the reader actually live through it. It would be a strange and unsatisfactory novel where we'd forgotten the beginning by the time we reached the end. As readers, we remember and accumulate the whole of the novel in our minds. We comprehend the arc of a novel's story in a way that we can never achieve for our own lives.

(Perhaps that's why we enjoy novels?)

When something happens over time but not in any particular moments of times, telling it is the only way to go –

> 'Over the next year, Janey stopped worrying about her mother's constant harping criticisms …'

Or retrospectively –

> 'A year ago, that kind of comment from her mother would have eaten away at Janey's confidence, but not any more …'

Hmm … not very inspiring illustrations. Hopefully, you'd do the telling more effectively—so effectively that you'd persuade readers to change their expectations about Janey and actually create a revised sense of her personality

1. Creating Characters

(vi) CREATING CHARACTERS IN GROUPS

I used to work on creating characters as individuals. My first published novel, *The Vicar of Morbing Vyle*, is full of extreme grotesques, fabulous eccentrics. But I had huge problems when I had to work them in with the story and get them bouncing off each other. They were so self-sufficient, they didn't really need anyone else. It took years of rethinking and rewriting before I could get them interacting in interesting ways.

A decade later, when I wrote the prequel, *The Black Crusade*, I'd learned my lesson. Although the characters are equally grotesque, I'd already built in forms of interaction, amongst one another as well as with the protagonist.

In the novel I'm now working on, where the characters are colourful but not grotesque, I've been thinking of them together from the very start. My ideas for the protagonist's father and stepmother fitted in with the protagonist herself, but I wasn't sure they were right until I discovered how they could also strike sparks off each other.

As for the kids' group, I dropped one of the friends who wasn't working in well. Yes, he was an interesting personality in himself, and yes, he could get along with the others—but I needed more than just getting along. The other kids gave extra colour to one another, but not Wace. So, bye-bye Wace!

For maybe the first time, I also thought very hard about family groups. Families didn't have a large role in my previous novels (I count Col's family in *Worldshaker* as a special case), so I'd never thought much about the balance of like and unlike, of imitation and opposition. Half the work of conveying a personality is done if the reader can be read it off from a family situation.

One family that fell into place with a 'click' was the family for the male lead. Not an obvious family, not similar to him in personality, but exactly the right family to make him what he is. I found exactly the right schoolteacher for him too!

There's always another novel for an individual character—but not for a relationship or a group

1. Creating Characters

(vii) CHARACTER-ARCS

There's an old argument about whether story or character comes first in a novel; and an old answer, that you can't have one without the other. 'What's a story but character in motion?'

Sounds good and it's sort of true. You can't have one without the other, but you can have more emphasis on one than the other. Semi-autobiographical novels typically have plenty of character, but not as much story as you need for a genre novel.

Anyone who phrases the question, 'What's a story but character in motion?' is already loading the dice. How often do you hear it phrased the other way round, 'What's character but the motivations for a story?'

Semi-autobiographical fiction has only as much story as you get by bombarding your character(s) with events and observing the reactions. You're not likely to arrive at a story which builds up on itself. That kind of story that needs thinking about in terms of story-arc.

I like to think of characters as character-arcs too. For me, the word arc implies a strong overall shape to the development a character goes through in a novel. Not a

multitude of small reactions, this way and that, all over the place—but a sequence that builds up.

A motto I repeat to myself is: a character should be bigger and more interesting by the end of a novel than they were at the start. They should have gone somewhere and got somewhere.

1. Creating Characters

(viii) MAKING CHARACTERS LIKABLE

I put this in, because it's often said that readers prefer to keep company with characters they'd choose as friends in real life—so your characters ought to be attractive, likable personalities. Maybe it's true, but I can't convince myself to act on it.

I only care that my characters are interesting and colourful. I want to be able to empathise with them, but not necessarily like them or respond to them as friends. My protagonists are more often troubled than attractive personalities.

I'm not the person to give tips on this. Some other source of advice needed!

2. Physical Appearance

(i) PASSPORT DETAILS

There are two main characters in the first SF/detective novel I had published by a big mainstream publisher. Vail is physically striking—a sort of future goth—and I had no trouble describing her. Eddon, on the other hand, isn't striking: regular features rather than handsome, gritty and nuggetty in a Russell Crowe sort of way. (So easy to picture Russell Crowe—but then try turning that picture into words!)

I didn't realise till my editor pointed it out, that I'd given no physical description of Eddon for the first hundred pages. I'd shirked the task! I worked in a description in the re-write.

Readers need the passport details—and early on. Colour of hair, colour of eyes, shape of nose and jaw, build, style of clothes. Not very exciting, but such details are a peg to hang pictures on.

The fact is, there's probably no area of a novel where it's more up to readers to do the job for themselves. Everyone forms their own picture of how a character looks—and everyone's picture is different from everyone else's. If the novel gets made into a movie, how often do people say, no, that's not how I imagined him/her at all?

Passport details also help to mark the characters as separate and distinct. Blond(e) hair versus brown versus black versus ginger versus … The only problem is that the possibilities are limited, you can soon run out!

Another passport detail is age. It matters to set the ages of you main characters very early on, and, for younger characters, to set their ages in actual years. Again, not very exciting, but a necessary peg.

Side-note. There's a rule of thumb for children's and YA writing—set the age(s) of your main character(s) at the top or slightly above the age range of your expected readership. If you're aiming at 10-14 year olds, your main character should be about 14 or 15. Young readers don't like reading about kids younger than themselves.

2. Physical Appearance

(ii) EXPRESSIVE DETAILS

Passport details aren't exciting; what would be exciting would be to capture the full exact impression of a face. I mean, the kind of impression that depends on minute lines around the eyes, a particular faint twist to the mouth … the kind of grooves etched in by habitual expressions. Faces can tell you so much. A cheery-looking face may not go with a truly cheerful personality—but there will be clues!

Here's where I suffer another bad case of film-envy. It's so simple for a director to capture all these expressive details in a single shot. But with language, it's an uphill struggle all the way.

It's not only that there aren't many words and they aren't very exact, it's also that the words don't necessarily bring a picture with them. I've heard it said that 'X's eyes are too far apart', and I know what it means in theory, but I have no idea what it actually looks like. In real life, I'm sure I could recognise it as a certain appearance that some faces have, but I've never conceptualised it.

Perhaps it's like the language of wine. There are technical words that mean something to experts in the field, but not to the common and garden drinker like me. I find faces fascinating, different kinds of faces, and I often form very clear pictures for the faces of characters I want to describe. Only I can't describe them. *#@%#*!!!

The best I can do is capture a highlight detail or two, a distinctive detail of a kind that would never feature on a passport or a police description. For example, a projecting lower lip, or an upper lips that lifts slightly over the front teeth.

That's only a beginning, though, because a projecting lower lip might suggest aggression, but with a tiny variation could suggest sensuality. An upper lip that lifts slightly over the front teeth can be expressive of vulnerability, but with a tiny variation can look predatory. See what we're up against? Words are blunt instruments for conveying those tiny variations.

But all is not lost—the personality can direct the picture. If we know a particular character is aggressive, that will shape our imagination of a projecting lower lip. If we see someone's upper lip lifting in a moment of vulnerability, that will give us our clue for a general picture.

If the worst comes to the worst, it's always possible to use words like 'vulnerable-looking' or 'predatory-looking', 'sour' or 'resigned', 'severe' or 'hesitant'.

Similes can help too. Vail in *The Dark Edge* smiles like a cat—and I think, I hope, that the cat association influences the reader's overall picture of her.

I don't know if this would be useful for anyone else, but I sometimes work with hidden similes. In a recent book (no title, because I want the simile to stay hidden!) I imagined one particular character as turtle-like. The comparison never actually appeared in the book, but it shaped the way I described him all the way through.

2. Physical Appearance

(iii) MENTIONING APPEARANCE

The passport details need setting very early on, and the expressive details shouldn't be far behind. But how to do it?

It's easy to have one character register another's physical appearance. You can make it occur naturally in the first character's thoughts, even though it's really for the reader's benefit. But how do you let the reader know about the first character's appearance?

I hate the mirror-device at the start of a novel (or short story), where the protagonist conveniently looks in the mirror and thinks about his or her own appearance. Spare me! It's so over-used and artificial. We look in the mirror almost always for a particular purpose, not to reflect in a general way upon the appearance of our faces.

I'd rather be honest about doing it for the reader's benefit –

> She flicked her hair out of her eyes and turned away. She had ash-blonde hair, shoulder length, with no hint of a curl …

The first sentence is a lead-in to direct attention; the second sentence is the author telling the reader. I'm assuming that she's not thinking about her hair, and nor is any other character in the scene.

One trick that can work is description by compare and contrast. In *Worldshaker*, the protagonist, Col, looks at his sister and thinks how she's inherited some of their grandfather's physical traits, while he's inherited others. That seemed a not-too-implausible way of getting him to register his own appearance.

There's always a problem when we're deeply immersed in a single character's point of view, as with Col in *Worldshaker*. The aim is to avoid head-on description, as by having the character virtually announce, 'I shall now think about my own appearance.' You need a way of bringing it in on the side, in the course of other thinking.

When you've set up passport and expressive detail early on, how often do you need to repeat them? When is enough enough?

I had a bad habit of referring too frequently to the same features—the blackness of Vail's hair, for example—until an editor pointed it out. An occasional mention can help keep a character's appearance before the reader's mind, but frequent mention sure as hell becomes annoying.

It's often hard to judge, though … which means, this is a good question to ask for feedback from sample readers. I'm happy to let other people make the call for me.

3. Character Point of View

(i) LEVELS OF POINT OF VIEW

A novel takes a character's point of view when it shows events from his or her perspective. There are different levels of point of view (POV), more or less immersed, more or less exclusive.

The loosest level hardly counts as POV at all—when author and reader accompany a character moving from room to room, street to street, one place to another. We observe as the character observes, but we don't particularly observe through his/her eyes and ears. Following a character in this way comes naturally to all storytelling.

There's a stronger sharing of perspective when we perceive through the eyes and ears of characters, yet not one character to the exclusion of others. Water dripping, an unpleasant smell, even racing heartbeats can be presented as experienced by all the characters in a scene. Logically, they wouldn't have the same exact perceptions in the same exact sequence, but you can leave it vague as to who's experiencing what when.

Point of view becomes more focused when you pin it to the exact perceptions in the exact sequence experienced by a single character. Will, Zoe and Trudy may all be present in scene, but it's Trudy's perceptions we share. What would she see, hear, smell, touch? … the old checklist comes into play again.

It's a deeper immersion again when we get into thinking as well as perceiving. Perceptions start from the shared external world; thoughts connect with the thinker's individual experience, not shared with other people. The more such thoughts delve into personal memories of the past, the more we're enclosed in a unique and separate point of view.

A novel narrated by an 'I' voice is necessarily immersed in the point of view of the 'I' character. We'll get the character's thoughts and interpretations and maybe general reflections on life. At the same time, some 'I' voices draw on hindsight to transcend their perceptual limitations when narrating the moments of the scene.

More about the 'I' voice later.

3. Character Point of View

(ii) POINT OF VIEW IN POPULAR FICTION

Film is an external perceptual medium. Sometimes we may accompany one character for long periods, but the camera still 'sees' from many different angles. Only in very

special casse would the director try to make the camera behave like the eyes of a single character.

Modern literary novels are often at the opposite extreme, in love with point of view for its own sake. That is, they're fascinated by the fact that no individual's experience is quite the same as anyone else's. So point of view jumps from one total immersion to another, simply to demonstrate the differences of subjectivity.

Popular genre writers operate in the middle. They aren't interested in demonstrating the differences of subjectivity as a message, and they are interested in keeping the action flowing—which is hardly possible when you're jumping between separate perspectives on the same event. However, immersion in a particular point of view does have its benefits.

One obvious benefit is personal involvement. Seeing the world as one character sees it, we get to share their hopes and fears and expectations—all the invisible factors that extend beyond the immediate action and give this moment its special emotional significance. Novels can't match the vivid visceral presentation of action in movies, but they're better at personalising the action with a particular character's hopes and fears and expectations.

3. Character Point of View

(iii) WITHHOLDING BY POINT OF VIEW

The other big benefit of point of view is that a restricted perspective provides a perfect rationale for suspense.

> What's that rattling sound?
> Who's behind that approaching flashlight?
> Why is Ben shouting, 'Cover your head!'?

When we're standing in the shoes of a particular character, it's not the author wilfully withholding information in order to make us keep turning the pages. But it keeps us turning the pages just the same.

Novels are especially good at slow, step-by-step revelations. A first feather-light clue leads on to a disturbing suggestion, leads on to a terrible probability—until finally the whole shocking reality emerges.

One exercise I use in creative writing workshops involves planning the steps by which a revelation can creep up on the reader.

For example, when Tam and Nina explore a ruined monastery in my kid's fantasy *Wolf Kingdom* 1: *Escape!* what clues can convey the suggestion that someone is still living there? Sound without sight is always good; and smell; and any details suspiciously out of the ordinary.

Sometimes the reader guesses more than the character, by deducing ahead or by having had access to information through other points of view. Or the reader may interpret clues that the character blithely fails to notice. Sharing a character's perceptions can create suspense even when the reader isn't totally limited to the character's point of view.

The limitations on what a single character knows (rather than perceives) can provide a rationale for mystery throughout a whole novel. The POV character has never been told what happened to her older brother; has never understood why her mother committed suicide, etc.

More on this in relation to narrative momentum. For now, just a memo: creating a mystery is easier with a restricted point of view.

3. Character Point of View

(iv) INTRODUCING NEW POINTS OF VIEW

How many points of view do you need? Unlike modern literary fiction, genre fiction doesn't multiply points of view to prove how differently individuals experience the world, only when such differences matter to the story.

There's also the practical goal of covering events beyond the experience of any one character. Multiple points of view are natural to large-scale epic fantasy, where the story spreads out into many locations and many strands.

So how to introduce a new point of view? Literary writers discovered a simple way to do it: make a section or chapter break, then dive into the new POV without explanation. It's like re-launching the novel in a new place. The technique works, and it's available for genre writers too. The only proviso is that, if you're going to do it, you should probably set the pattern early.

Side-note: setting the pattern early is relevant to many choices of structure and formatting. Let the reader know what the norms are for this particular novel. It would be disconcerting if all chapters in the first half of the novel were around 3 pages long, then all chapters in the second half were around 30. If you want to alternate between those extremes, best start doing it early.

So the technique of diving in without explanation is available for genre writers—but it's not very reader-friendly. It's especially unfriendly when the new point of view characters inhabits a new location or opens up a new strand of story. Other things being equal, I prefer to introduce characters from the outside first, so that reader has some understanding of who they are and how they fit in. When we later enter their individual point of view, we know what we're getting into.

Lord of the Rings is a classic example of multiplying points of view, as and when needed. We start with Frodo, who gathers companions: first Sam, Merry and Pippin, then Strider, then Legolas and Gimli. Gradually, these companions turn into independent POV characters, carrying the story out into different narrative strands. But we're always given time to become familiar with each character before we're asked to share their perceptions and thoughts.

I think that's an excellent strategy when you need broad coverage for a whole fantasy world. Let the reader see through the eyes of the protagonist first; then create an interest in and emotional attachment to some other characters in the protagonist's life; then follow up on those characters and let them carry the point of view into areas where the protagonist can't—or doesn't have time—to go.

3. Character Point of View

(v) SWITCHING POINT OF VIEW

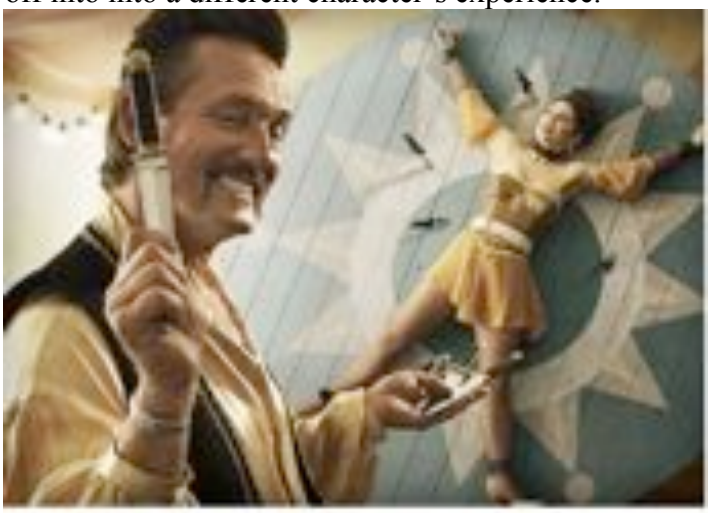
Switching point of view suddenly from one character to another is easy with a chapter or section break, but it can be dislocating in continuous text. It's a jolt for readers who think they're still sharing one character's experience to find themselves pitched into the mind of another.

A point of view doesn't disappear the moment it's no longer explicitly sourced to a particular character. Once the author has conveyed the idea that this is, say, Trudy's experience, readers will continue to understand everything as coming through her. It's necessary to withdraw from the old point of view before moving into a new one.

Different levels of point of view are important here. If we've been sharing Trudy's inner thoughts and memories of the past, it'll be a huge jolt to flip across into Zoë's point of view. It'll be less of a jolt if we've been sharing perceptions that were sourced to Trudy, but which Zoë might have experienced too. The deeper the immersion, the harder to withdraw.

Making a switch smoothly takes time. You need a lot of non-Trudy material before the reader will stop assuming her perspective. Dialogue is especially useful here, because dialogue is 'public' and not personalised to any individual point of view.

Once you've reached the level where perceptions seem to belong equally to all characters in the scene—the dripping water, the unpleasant smell—then you're ready to start moving off into into a different character's experience.



"Watch carefully. This one could go anywhere ..."

There's also line of sight. In film terms, this means, roughly, that the camera turns to what the audience wants to see. One character throws a knife and we're immediately curious about where it ends up—in the chest of a different character, perhaps. Or one character calls out an urgent question, and the camera swings with our attention to focus on the questionee.

Similarly with point of view in a novel. Switching into the mind of a character who's just passively standing around is liable to seem arbitrary. It's much more natural if Trudy, who has been the POV character, shouts 'Check the corridor!' to Will, and hands him the torch … then, following the action, we accompany Will as he explores the corridor, and slip gradually into his point of view.

In popular fiction, action directs attention and attention can influence point of view.

STORY

Sub-sections & Pages

1. BEGINNINGS
(i) THE FAST GRAB

1. Beginnings

(i) THE FAST GRAB

I sometimes think, wouldn't it be great to have a Stephen King-size reputation, so you could be sure a reader wouldn't give up on your novel if the first 50 pages weren't instantly attention-grabbing. Then you could take a long view and build up towards the really big events later.

China Miéville gets away with it somehow—the important action barely moves forward in the first 200 pages of *Perdido Street Station* or *The Scar*. I'd have given up except that friends had told me. 'You must read this'—and they were right. The slow set-up pays off wonderfully when those two novels finally shift into massive action. For most genre writers, though, the fast grab is a practical necessity.

It's not easy when the reader doesn't yet care about the characters or understand the context. What's needed is the kind of action that can be immediately, generally exciting.

In the first chapter of *Worldshaker*, Col is woken up in the middle of the night when two warrant officers burst into his cabin, wielding batons, searching for a renegade. After they've left, Col suddenly thinks to look under his bed—and there she is, wide startled eyes peering out at him. I think it manages to be exciting even though the reader doesn't yet know that this is all happening in a world that's hugely different from our own. In fact, Col's cabin is a cabin in a juggernaut, not a ship, and the renegade girl is fleeing from something unthinkable in our own reality.

It wasn't always like this. In the 19th century, when novels didn't have to compete with a hundred other claims on our attention, they typically began with a slow zoom and pan. The reader would be introduced to the locale ('a small village, not sixty miles from London'), the protagonist's family ('had lived in X Street for a hundred years … held in wide respect'), then gradually bringing forward the protagonist by way of upbringing, customary activities and so on. 19th Century readers liked their bearings first.

Nowadays, we live in a film world, so we're used to being pitched headlong into the middle of a scene. We don't fluster and panic—'Where are we?' 'Who's that woman?' 'Why is she doing that?' We trust to pick up the situation as we go along.

Even young readers don't demand to be given a full explanation of the situation first—perhaps less so than older adult readers (though publishers may not agree).

1. Beginnings

(ii) STARTING ON THE INSIDE

Starting inside a scene is very different to approaching it slowly from outside. There's a special verbal knack to presenting it as the characters experience it.

In real life, if you're describing a room in a house to someone who hasn't been there, you say things like:

> There's a long table …
> and a painting of a landscape …
> and a green carpet …

Similarly with the 19th century novel:

> A small village…
> a family that …

Note the 'a's, indefinite articles—not 'the's.

You move to the definite article only after you've introduced these things:

> There's a long table and a vase of chrysanthemums on the table …

When you start a novel inside a scene, though, you use the rather than a, because the characters experience these things as already known and familiar. It's a sort of pretence that the reader enters into.

> She paced up and down on the green carpet …
> the table was covered in dust, as usual …

This isn't exactly a helpful tip—living and reading in the 21st century, any author will do it automatically. Interesting, though.

1. Beginnings

(iii) WHERE TO OPEN?

OK, so you open some place where you can arrange an exciting scene. But how far into the sequence of events? At the very first event that helps to determine what happens?

The trouble with opening at the very first event is that it's liable to be a long way back. For *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien would have had to re-tell the Hobbit story of Bilbo finding the ring … or further back again, the story of Isildur losing the ring …

or even … The more you try to find the very first event, the more it keeps retreating into the past.

J.R.R. Tolkien's first notes for *Lord of the Rings*

So, wipe that. You want to open at a point where events have become and will remain interesting, a point from which the story can generate continuous momentum. An exciting first chapter is no use if it's followed by a long saggy interlude before events start rolling again.

On the other hand, there's a problem if the story has already become so complex that the reader can't understand what's going on. You don't want to stop the story dead while you untangle the complications. Then you lose momentum in a different way.

The basic rule of thumb is that the later you open, the more backstory you need to feed through; the less backstory, the earlier you need to open.

Finding the best place to begin a novel is a juggling act. But then the same applies to so much of the writing business—one juggling act after another. We're always looking to get the best of both worlds.

There's one more consideration: a good place to start, if it's also exciting and there's ongoing momentum, is a scene where lives intersect. If you're going to develop your main characters and storylines fairly separately for a while, it's handy to bring them together for a moment at the start.

The intersection will probably be shallow rather than a deep—being together at a party, participating in a sports event, sharing the same space with no strong emotional strings attached. Deep connections can come later. At this stage, it makes for a well-balanced start if you can launch your main characters and storylines simultaneously.

1. Beginnings

(iv) FEEDING THROUGH A BACKSTORY

One method is for the author simply to tell what happened.

> Five years ago, Denny had had an affair with …
> The house had been inhabited by drug gangs, and a brutal murder had occurred just months before Vee and Lorrie moved in …

If you kicked off your first chapter with a dramatic scene, telling some backstory could be a way of starting your second chapter. Old-fashioned, but simple and economical.

For a writer nowadays, the obvious method for feeding through a backstory is to have a main character remember the past. It's effective so long as it doesn't look like a cheat. The only thing worse than a character standing in front of the mirror and thinking about his/her appearance is a character standing in front of the mirror and remembering about his/her past life and recent history. So corny and clichéd!

Please, can we have a character's memories genuinely prompted by something that happens, something that's said? And when they are prompted, can they look like genuine memories rather than a plot synopsis?

When we remember past events, we rarely run through the full story—this-led-to-that-led-to-the-other—which we already know. We zoom in on the emotionally charged highlights and the bits that are relevant to us right now.

I reckon backstory memories often seem more plausible when they're questions rather than statements. We don't pore over the detail of past events merely to re-state them to ourselves, but we do when we're puzzled or uncertain about what happened. We might run through the whole chain of cause and effect if we're trying to spot something that doesn't gel, something that doesn't make sense to us.

Dialogue can be a great method for feeding through backstory. Whereas internal thoughts easily fall into a kind of monotone, to-and-fro dialogue can remain lively for any length of time. The minimum required is one character who knows and one who doesn't, or—often better—two or more who half-know.

But it has to be real dialogue of course. Beware the tokenistic prompt!

> 'Tell be about your journey so far, captain.'
> 'I believe you had some difficulty with the steering, Enrico?'
> 'And how did you escape from that deadly attack?'

The handing over of information should only be a part of the scenario—you want interesting character interaction too. Perhaps Harris is accusing Enrico, or Lois is trying to impress, or Melissa is reluctant to reveal more than she absolutely has to. There are a million possibilities, and they can all be read off from the dialogue itself, even when your characters aren't well established yet.

If that causes the backstory to impact on the present story, all the better! The accusation or reluctant revelation will have consequences that advance the action.

One last method for feeding through backstory is to insert blocks of text in the form of official reports, newspaper articles, transcripts of interviews, letters, etc. You don't even need to give a context or provide a connection to your main story: just drop in the material as a discontinuous block.

I guess it works because these texts are as if already written and floating about in the world of the novel. The author doesn't have to take responsibility for turning them into words. Simple!

1. Beginnings

(v) REDUCING IN RETROSPECT

Here's another rule of thumb: events fed through as backstory are more compressed than events presented dramatically.

The various methods of feeding through backstory work by retrospection (except perhaps inserted blocks of text), and, retrospectively, we have the benefit of hindsight on events. That is, we can recognise what mattered in the long run and choose to tell only those details that determined the outcome, ignoring those that didn't.

Dramatic presentation, on the other hand, aims to convey the feel of experience lived moment to moment, before we or the characters can know what will or won't matter in the long run. Dramatic presentation advances on a broad wavefront, giving all the details that might matter.

The compressing effect of backstory can be very useful in short stories, where space is at a premium. Comparing general impressions of short stories and novels, I suspect that short stories often open later in the sequence of events and feed through more material in backstory.

It helps that everything in a short story typically focuses towards some final crux, some dominant effect, so that there's a tighter selection of details quite apart from backstory. And it's not so important to develop the journey along the way when the end is no more than 10 or 20 pages distant.

The best strategy of all is a personal, quirky narrator. Personal, quirky narrators may narrate novels, but they're rare for really long novels (fantasy trilogies, for example) and very common for short stories. The tone and bounce and (conscious or unconscious) humour of the voice can make a backstory entertaining in its own right. No need to worry about continuous narrative momentum—the voice may be even more entertaining if it jumps and zigzags about.

1. Beginnings

(vi) CALCULATED MYSTERY

In my first draft of a novel, I often put in too much backstory too soon. I want the reader to understand the set-up, so I rush to lay it out as fully as possible.

Then, when I come to a second draft, I realise I didn't have to lay it all out. There are some things the reader needs to know and other things for which the reader can be made to wait.

Bafflement is bad, but a calculated mystery is good. The urge to find an answer is a great incentive to keep the reader reading.

With literary novels, the reader is often expected to put up with a great deal of bafflement. I picture readers of literary novels gritting their teeth and muttering, 'This will be good for me if I can only make it through this first hundred pages.' Genre fiction aims to be more reader-friendly.

As a writer of genre fiction, I recommend asking a friend or fellow-writer to read your first 20 pages, then quizzing them to see what they have or haven't understood.

But back to calculated mystery. You need to give enough solid backstory so that the gap of what's missing is clearly visible. In other words, you want readers to know what it is they don't know.

> What was the unpleasantness that happened in this house before Vee and Lorrie moved in?
> Exactly why is Denny's relationship with Mal on the rocks?

Questions like that make readers go looking for answers.

What you don't want is a general vague miasma. You don't want the kind of obscurity where your readers go 'Uh?' and throw up their hands in despair. It's one thing to pose a question, another thing to pose so many questions that your readers feel they have no firm ground to stand on.

1. Beginnings

(vi) UNFAMILIAR OTHERWORLDS

Every problem of beginnings and backstories is multiplied a hundredfold in speculative fiction. In fantasy and SF, there's so much more that the reader needs to be told—not just the backstory to the characters, but the backstory to the whole world.

Think of a realistic novel. We're aware that the characters and main events are made up; quite likely, the street where the characters live is made up too; and possibly even the suburb. But spreading further afield, we eventually reach the bedrock of our own real world. San Francisco is still San Francisco, with its hills and bay; Union Square is still Union Square; the Barack Obama on the characters' TV screens is the same Barack Obama as on our TV screens; and the Taliban they read about is the real-world Taliban we read about.

These things are all real in the sense that we can expect our real-world knowledge to apply to them. We're not going to find Union Square inhabited by dinosaurs or the Taliban as a group of neo-Marxist socialists.

With speculative fiction, our thinking runs the other way. If these particular characters live under such different conditions, then the whole world must be fundamentally different. We can't rely on any of our normal assumptions about history or geography. Things will keep on being unfamiliar however far we look.

For anyone who loves speculative fiction, this is one of its special delights: the fascination of what's possible on the borders, or beyond the borders, of the novel.

The Lord of the Rings is the first best example. Our imaginations play with the glimpsed wonders of the past (exactly what happened with Thangorodrim and Angband?), or the glimpsed realms in Middle Earth that Tolkien didn't describe (the Easterlings and the realms around the Sea of Rhun?).

(I won't get into the argument on whether the answers provided in *The Silmarillion* lived up to the suggestions in *LOTR* … enough that we were desperate to learn more!)

However, the special delight is also a special curse. The great danger for all speculative fiction is 'info-dumping', when the writer shovels huge undigested loads of background material onto the reader. It's so tempting to let the forward story disappear while explaining the different history and geography and general conditions of this world for pages at a time.

If balancing backstory and forward story is a juggling act in all genre fiction, then in speculative fiction it's the juggling act supreme.

1. Beginnings

(viii) STARTING FROM A CORNER

The old solution to introducing an unfamiliar world was to enter it from outside. When the children in the *Narnia* books cross over from our own reality, they start out as ignorant as we are. They learn the backstory of Narnia and we learn right along with them.

Since Tolkien, though, fantasy writers are more likely to start from inside the otherworld. No one travels to Middle Earth; on the contrary, the whole of *LOTR* is supposedly derived from a book written within that world, the *Red Book of Westmarch*.

The advantage is a fuller immersion, a better sense of how it feels to have been born in that world and live in that culture. Travellers from our reality are always essentially tourists.

The simplest solution with a total otherworld is to start from a corner, where the characters are relatively ignorant of the larger world around them. We start out inside the unfamiliar world, but we also learn about it as the characters learn about it.

So, in *LOTR*, we start out in the Shire, a small and simple community, and the part of Middle Earth that's closest to a part of our own real world. Hobbit society is generally blinkered, satisfied and self-contained. But when our main characters journey further afield, we find out about other, stranger parts of this world, a bit at a time, in easily digested portions.

Starting in a corner is easily arranged in fantasy otherworlds, which tend to have many different regions, separate communities and slow communications. What's more, journeying has always been a natural feature of fantasy narratives. By contrast, SF worlds are more likely to be urban, relatively homogenous, with excellent communications. Creating innocence can still be arranged, but it's much more difficult.

Thankfully, there are many special cases of innocence. For instance, a character who had had no contact with the world due to long-term imprisonment or seclusion or a cocooned upbringing (as Col has been cocooned in *Worldshaker*). Another possibility is a character whose memory has been wiped.

My favourite example of wiped memory is fantasy rather than SF: the protagonist in Silverberg's *Lord Valentine's Catle*. Supplanted as ruler and transferred into another body, Valentine at first remembers nothing about his past and very little about his kingdom. However, he starts to remember as he re-learns, making the process much quicker than for a growing child. It works perfectly in this particular novel.

1. Beginnings

(ix) FANTASY PROLOGUES

One extra allowance for fantasy writers is the convention of the fantasy prologue. Namely, a block of text, usually half a page to a couple of pages long, which stands on its own before the novel's official opening.

A prologue used to serve as a sort of introduction, providing background information. But most prologues nowadays are short dramatic scenes, disconnected from the official opening and having no immediate relation to the main story.

One use for this kind of prologue is to provide a burst of excitement if Chapter 1 of the main story doesn't launch straight into dramatic action.

Side-note: when you browse a fantasy novel in a bookshop, do you glance at the prologue or at the first page of the Chapter 1? I tend to go for the first page, then the prologue afterwards if the first page catches my interest …

Probably the most important use for this kind of prologue is to spread out the size of an otherworld. If a fantasy begins in a small corner of its world (for reasons suggested in Section (viii)), a prologue can let the reader know there's a wider story and bigger events to come. It's like a teaser or trailer, jumping out to a far-distant metropolis or an earlier period of history. We know that story will eventually expand to include a relevance for this disconnected scene.

'Eventually' may be a long way away, though. The connection to the main story may not emerge for a hundred or several hundred pages. Are readers seriously expected to wait all that time for an answer?

My guess is that such prologues soon drop out of the reader's mind. When a prologue is disconnected and without context, it's like a dream, and soon sinks away for lack of reinforcement. You know how a dream in the morning is so clear when you wake up? – then five minutes later, you're frustrated to discover only a few traces remain; fifteen minutes later, it's gone for good.

If a prologue is used for excitement or to spread out the size of an otherworld, this is no problem at all. The prologue has already done its job. In fact, it could be an advantage, because you don't need to worry about pre-empting later story developments or giving away too much. As soon as readers get caught up in living through the events of the main story, you can rely them largely forgetting the prologue.

I suspect it's more a matter of having to make the connection very explicit if you do want readers to remember back, a hundred or several hundred pages further on.

2. Middles

(i) MID-NOVEL SAG

The beginning of a novel is tight—so much to fit in, so little time. It's like a torrent channelled through a narrow gorge. Then the walls fall away and there's a wide flat plain, with room to move, room to meander. The climax is still far, far away. You've come to the middle of the novel.

Now you can relax, develop your characters, follow up interests. Your story can spread out into sub-stories. But beware! You can relax too much.

The beginning of a novel is hard to write, but at least the difficulties are visible and you know what you have to do. The middle is the most treacherous stretch because it can look easy when it isn't. You can go wrong here and only find out later that you've run into the doldrums.

This is the deadly zone of mid-novel sag!

I recommend a pause and a taking stock. For me, there's always a moment, 10-15,000 words in, when the tight opening sequence of scenes runs out. Suddenly, everything is possible and nothing is necessary. So many angles to follow—but which one first?

So I take a deep breath and gear up for the long haul. I re-think and re-plan until the feeling of necessity comes back in. Yes, this is the way it has to happen! This is the way it did happen!

2. Middles

(ii) REVERSALS & TURNAROUNDS

In the middle of a novel, you can go a little slower than at the beginning or climax, maybe, but you still have to maintain tension and excitement. You still need ups and downs, hopes and threats, knife-edges where the decision could go either way.

This is where genre novels don't imitate real life. In real-life criminal investigations, according to those who know, the person eventually found guilty is most often the person who was suspected in the first place. No reversals or turnarounds, just slow hard work and steady progress. Not very exciting.

Or consider a story that my stepson (hi Chris!) wrote in primary school about a running race. It went something like –

> The starter gave the signal and I took off before the others.
> We ran round the first bend and I was in the lead.
> We ran round the second bend and I was even more in the lead.
> I could see the finishing tape and I was five metres ahead.
> I won.

True to life? It was true to most of Chris's races in primary school. And in sporting contests generally, early advantage tends to lead on to greater advantage, which tends to lead on to final victory. But sporting contests never happen like that in genre fiction!

Chris's running race story, like real-life criminal investigations, lacks a middle. A good middle needs reversals and turnarounds, changes of fortune.

Wise old Aristotle in his Poetics said that the better kind of plot works through sudden changes of fortune, which he called peripeteia. See, I told you I was once a uni lecturer!

2. Middles

(iii) SUCCESSIVE vs SIMULTANEOUS

Sub-stories and interests can be developed successively or simultaneously or both.

When they're successive, one sub-story rises and climaxes, to be followed by a second, then a third, and so on. Fantasy probably uses this structure more than any other genre nowadays. The classical quest is a string of adventures as the protagonist(s) move(s) on from place to place.

Simultaneous sub-stories build up at the same time. This is also common in fantasy, where separate strands of sub-story spread out to cover a whole world. I guess fantasy is more diffuse and less centralised than any other genre.

Separate strands can be presented in long blocks at a time, as in Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*. Nowadays, though, the usual technique is cross-cutting between strands. It's the universal technique of film-making—and it's one of the changes Peter Jackson makes when turning *LOTR* into film.

How often to cut across? If it's important to show how developments are all going on at once, building up together, then very rapid cross-cutting is in order. If you want

greater immersion in the sub-stories and lives of the characters, then you'll probably cut across between, say, chapters rather than sections within chapters.

I seem to slip towards the middle ground between successive and simultaneous. I planned my gothic fantasy, *The Black Crusade*, as a quest of one adventure after another, but, in the writing, the travellers (Martin Smythe and the mad cultist crusaders) started to develop long-term sub-stories among themselves. Halfway through, I had to go back and rewrite the first part of the novel.

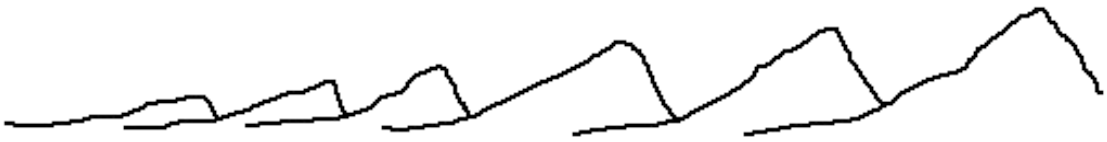
On the other hand, with a more simultaneous structure like *Worldshaker*, I find myself wanting to bring one sub-story to the fore at a time. Not to the exclusion of other sub-stories, but more strongly presented. There's always some exciting development in some strand crying out to be given special attention.

2. Middles

(iv) OVERLAPPING WAVES

My favourite structure for the middle of a novel is a rhythm of overlapping waves. Or perhaps I mean that this is my favourite way to think about structure for the middle of a novel.

Setting it out as a diagram, it looks like this:



Each wave represents the build-up and peaking of a particular sub-story or interest. Could be separate strands of narrative, could be different aspects of the protagonist's life. The height of the wave represents—very vaguely—the degree of intensity and excitement.

And, yes, I admit, I have drawn diagrams like that when working out middles for my last few novels. I told you I was a planner!

I like overlapping waves because it means no troughs, no flat periods. By the time one sub-story or interest is coming to its (temporary) resolution, another is already starting to build.

Anne McCaffrey's *Dragonflight* is a great illustration (first and best of the Pern books, for my money). When you break it down, there's a series of quite separate sub-stories:

a) Lessa triumphs as Fax is overthrown
b) Lessa succeeds in bonding with dragon
c) Weyr defeats revolt and forces come together against Threadfall
d) Threads are winning until reinforcements from the past arrive and save the day

But, in reading, you don't break it down, because the sub-stories are so seamlessly braided together. As one reaches its peak, the next is already hooking you in.

2. Middles

(v) A RISING TIDE

Overlapping waves is the whole strategy of TV soapies. The various strands never finish at the same time, but pass on the baton from one to another. The difference is that the strands in soapies are stories rather than sub-stories, and there's no larger story or overall build-up.

In my diagram, the waves tend to get bigger and higher. Join the tips of the waves and you have a single super-wave. If I continued the diagram past the middle of the novel, I guess the peak of that super-wave would be the novel's over-arching climax. (In *Dragonflight*, the super-wave would involve the relationship between Lessa and F'lar.)

As I said, I'm not sure if it's a special type of structure or a way of thinking about structure. I suspect it could fit over the middle of almost any novel. But even as a way of thinking, it's a great aid for someone like me.

I get past the beginning of the novel and feel daunted by the distance to the eventual climax. (Never more distant than in epic fantasy.) So much material, and all so shapeless!

Then I think in terms of overlapping waves, and the material becomes more manageable. I can deal with one wave, one phase, at a time. Phew! Events start to take their place in a definite rhythm.

Some authors write out chapter outlines, I draw overlapping waves. For me, it's a way to find a shape and hopefully escape mid-novel sag. Whatever works!

2. Middles

(vi) VARIETY

When you're developing sub-stories though the middle of a novel, you don't want to repeat yourself. That is, you don't want a sameness of settings or narrative twists or characters. Why have recurring toe-to-toe swordfights when you can so easily ring the changes with hand-to-hand combat, hurled spears, staves and clubs? or an ambush with arrows, a defensive stand, a pursuit on horseback? It's so obvious, it hardly needs thinking about for most genre fiction.

It may need thinking about for large-scale fantasy, though. Fantasy is such an inclusive genre, with room for adventure, romance, mystery, family saga, humour, tragedy, horror, etc. The fantasy reader expects different settings, different human or not-so-human types, different kinds of narrative interest.

So, in *LOTR*, Tolkien distinguishes three different forms of society in Middle Earth. The hobbits are settled agriculturalists; the Rohirrim are herders and horsemen; the people of Gondor are warrior-caste nobility. Different environments, different societies, different stories.

In *Ferren and the Invasion of Heaven*, I tried to create different scenes and stories in the part where the Residuals are in flight after an attack by artificial Humen. Not easy, after all the marvels I'd already put into journeys in *Ferren and the Angel* and *Ferren and the White Doctor*. Here are the main ones:

a) a river in flood, where they encounter a giant water snake that has eyes and mouth at both ends of its body

b) a plateau of rock that numbs their feet with a deep unnatural cold; also, bottomless well-like holes in the rock, from which a hollow voice booms up at them, the same from every hole

c) a forest of ferns that grow eggs like glassy spheres among their fronds; each egg contains a miniature copy of the parent fern

d) a beach of fur-snails, small velvety balls that move perpetually underfoot; overnight, the beach rises and falls like a tide

e) gullies filled with flowering plants whose filament-like stamens float upwards in the air like a white mist; they cause sneezing and headaches

I played around with other possibilities, especially other forms of vegetation, I remember—but they weren't different enough from the egg-ferns and mist-plants.

The way they are now also involved a bit of re-distribution. My first thought was to have the Residuals suffering headaches from the unnatural cold in the rock, but that had to go when the mist-plants had the same effect. Gullies were also a possible location for the ferns, but I didn't want to double up.

If variety is the spice of life, it can be even more the spice of fantasy fiction.

3. Climax & After

(i) THE DOWNHILL GLIDE

The climax should be the easiest part of the novel to write. If you've set everything up well, it almost writes itself.

I think of it as the toboggan ride, the downhill glide. This is my favourite part of the writing process, even more enjoyable than the early planning stages, which I also love.

The other side of the coin is that, if your climax keeps blocking and snagging, then it's probably not just the climax you need to revise, but everything that leads up to it. Problems at the climax usually stem from unnoticed problems in the middle. At least, that's my experience.

I'm not saying you should plan towards a climax from early on. I used to try that for my first few novels, and it had the opposite effect. I was always having to go back and revise. Now I rely on gut feeling. I know when I've got the material for a good, powerful climax, even though I can't tell exactly how it'll pan out.

I guess stories in novels work the other way round to reports in newspapers. The first two sentences of a newspaper report give the central facts, the next two paragraphs give the less important facts, and the remaining paragraphs fill out the smaller details. From most important to least important …

That's the natural sequence for telling things in real life too. First. 'There was a car crash on Hudson Street! I think someone was killed!' Then 'It was a truck and a car. There was glass and blood everywhere. I saw the ambulance come. The car was

mashed in like you wouldn't believe.' And finally, perhaps, a run-through of all the events in order.

By contrast, good storytelling in a novel withholds. The author doesn't blurt out all the best bits as soon as possible, but keeps the reader waiting, in suspense. And isn't this the mark of a good oral storyteller too?

I believe in holding some material in reserve for a powerful climax. You don't want to approach the end of a novel in a state of exhaustion. You don't want to discover you've already used up all your most evocative settings, your most effective twists of character, your most exciting action, etc etc.

Keep some good stuff back for the climax!

3. Climax & After

(ii) CONVERGENCES

The climax is where the story comes together. Various narrative strands and sub-stories show their mutual relevance and impact on one another.

Many of these convergences will have been planned when the novel was planned; others will emerge in the process of writing. When you're letting sub-stories develop through the middle of the novel, it's always a good idea to keep an eye open for potential connections.

My best example is my *Wolf Kingdom* books, a set of four short fantasies for kids. The overall story-arc tells how Tam and Nina join up with the Free Folk, an outlaw band that resists the tyranny of a Wolf-King who rules the land. A sub-story in Book 1 tells of a magic camouflage belt acquired by Tam. In Book 2, another sub-story tells of a magic metal-digesting bag acquired by Nina.

Gradually, the magic objects idea became an ongoing strand: so, a magic dagger for Chiz in Book 3. As for Book 4, well, I'd always intended to wrap up the quartet with the overthrow of the wolf-army. I'd expected that the magic objects would play a helpful role in the fighting.

But, as I was writing Book 3, *Race to the Ruins*, I realised that a fourth magic object could play a far, far bigger role. The fourth magic object could be already in the possession of the Wolf-King, as the secret source of his power. So the overthrow of the wolf-army would depend on taking the magic object from him.

It was a connection I'd never expected, and it fitted in perfectly with what I'd already established about the wolves and their powers. Suddenly, the magic object sub-stories had a much more important reason for being there all along. From then on, I felt as if the story was truly looking after itself. It knew where it wanted to go, and I'd finally caught up with it!

Maybe that was a memorable case for me because I hadn't been keeping my eye open and the realisation came so late. It confirmed what I've always believed, that the story is there and it's my job to unearth it.

When I think of plot, I think of something that the author has constructed and manipulated; when I thing of story in a positive sense—and it always has a positive sense with me—I think of something that has its own shape and necessities. The author is simply its midwife!

3. Climax & After

(iii) ON NOT RUSHING TO THE END

I have a pet hate—novels that sell themselves short with a rushed climax. Why? This is pay-off time, where reader and author both get their reward. Why are so many endings hasty and breathless?

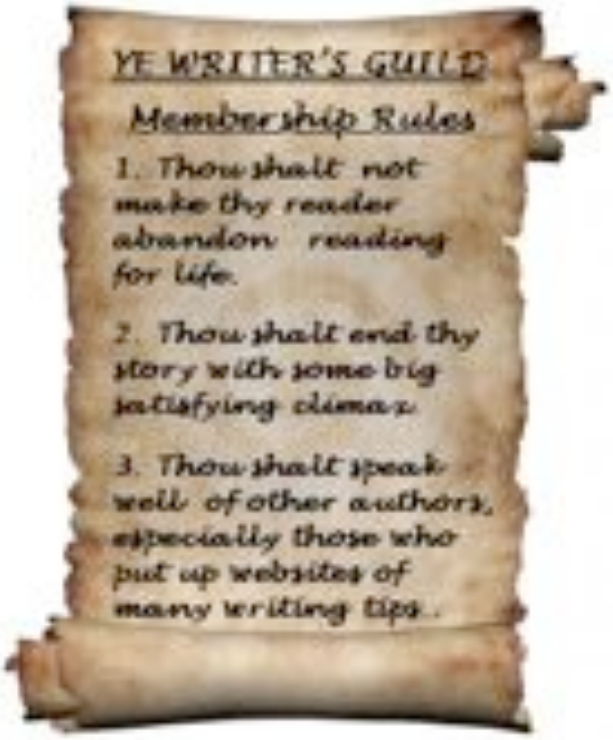
Perhaps it's impatience, when the writer sees the finishing line ahead and can't wait to have done. Perhaps it's a mistaken idea that events have to be told fast because they're happening fast. Whatever the cause, it's a waste.

Granted, a climax is no place for sideshows. If possibilities you've planned turn out not to fit, then junk them. Everything has to work together in the climax.

But what you do have—give it full value. Take in all the angles, describe as thoroughly as you would in any other part of the novel. Maybe even more thoroughly, in slow-mo … After all, the climax is one time when you have your readers in the palm of your hand. Here at least, you can be absolutely sure they're not going to toss the book aside.

I admit, I love big rolling climaxes that keep on unfolding for 50-100 pages. I set up my novels to produce them. But any kind of climax should still be allowed to grow to its own proper length.

I reckon every writer owes it to other writers not to leave the reader with a sense of dissatisfaction at the end. First duty to the writers' guild: your book should end in a way that makes the reader eager to get stuck into another book, someone's book, anyone's book.



3. Climax & After

(iv) WINDING DOWN

How long should a novel run on after the climax has peaked? Do you need to spell out consequences that readers can probably work out for themselves? Some novels deliver the bang of the climax, then pull down the curtain almost immediately.

Me, I like a scene or two to wind down with. I mean, a scene or two set later in time, a little detached from the climax, when the effects have sunk in. I like the afterglow mood, the satisfaction of success, the feeling of having lived through great events and come out on the other side.

The Lord of the Rings demontrates a range of ways of winding down. First, there's the chapter of celebration and triumph, "The Steward and the King", then the chapter of farewells, "Many Partings". All very afterglow-ish (though personally I'd have preferred a focus on a few well-chosen scenes with a bit less overall telling).

Then there's the long tailpiece of "The Scouring of the Shire", a whole extra story in minor key. It's like a secondary ripple after the great surge has passed. The novel's main protagonists, Frodo and Sam, stay out on the sidelines, and there's no real sense of jeopardy for anyone. We know Lotho and Sharkey are going to get their come-uppance. "The Scouring of the Shire" rates high in satisfaction, low in unpredictability.

Finally, there's the chapter "The Grey Havens", where Frodo, Gandalf, Bilbo and the elves are leaving Middle Earth for good. It's elegiac rather than triumphal, sad yet necessary. The mood is one of aftermath, if not afterglow.

I like what Tolkien does, but I'd never attempt to spend a whole 80 pages doing it. I'm sure my editor would be asking for cuts. It's not surprising (though Christopher Lee wouldn't agree) that Jackson's film version skimmed the post-victory celebrations and farewells, and, notoriously, dropped "The Scouring of the Shire" altogether.

3. Climax & After

(v) CLOSURE vs SEQUELS

In 19th century novels, readers liked a lot of closure. They enjoyed being told who was rewarded, who punished, and they enjoyed seeing all the ends tied off. Often, an epilogue would give them a summary of the rest of the main characters' lives.

Nowadays, we don't ask for as much closure as that. We don't believe in permanent happiness or lifelong stability in real life, so we don't expect it in novels either.

There's another consideration: the possibility of a sequel. Anyone writing fantasy, in particular, would be mad to close off a story so completely that they could never write a sequel. (I did this with my very first novel, *The Vicar of Morbing Vyle*. It took me ten years to discover that, although I couldn't write a sequel, I could write a prequel!)

The trick is to leave a degree of openness while conveying a sense of closure. If you tie off the major strands of the narrative, it's not difficult to leave smaller strands ongoing—strands that will become major in a sequel. You allow growing-space for further developments and maybe plant a few teasers as well.

I'm wary of thinking too much about sequels while actually writing a novel, though. *Ferren and the Angel* was written as a stand-alone, until I unpicked the ending and started wondering what might happen next. That worked fine.

It wasn't so fine when I planned and wrote two more novels to complete the trilogy, Because I planned them together, the stories ran into one another, and *Ferren and the White Doctor* became a mere lead-in to *Ferren and the Invasion of Heaven*. I had to re-think and re-write to give *Ferren and the White Doctor* a complete story-arc of its own.

3. Climax & After

(vi) THE FINAL NOTE

It's important to hit the right note on the last page. Although some strands may be ongoing, you still need to conclude this storytelling.

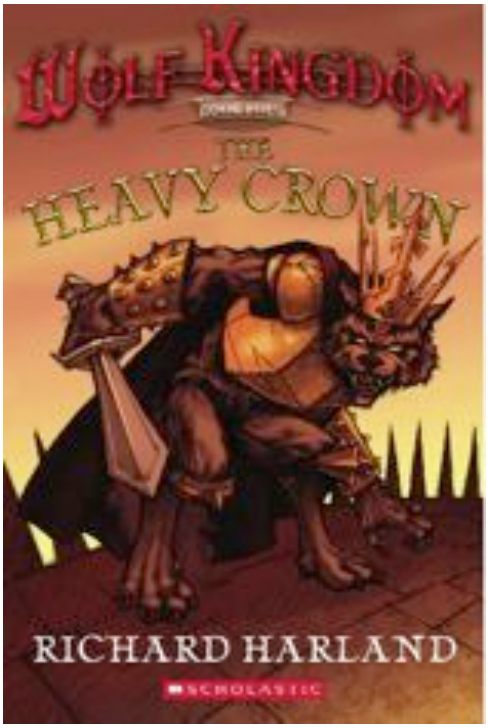
LOTR ends like a symphony, all boom and crash and subsiding echoes. But when you're not closing off story and characters and a whole era of history, you need a lighter note.

I think of the distancing device that ends so many movies. The characters head off into the distance or the camera backs off from the characters—either way, the characters (and their story) become small within the wider panorama. Often, the camera also rises to look down.

There are similar ways to create an impression of ending in a novel. Literally, as when Ferren and Kiet watch a multitude of Morphs spiralling heavenward, higher and higher into the sky, at the end of *Ferren and the Invasion of Heaven*. Or psychologically, at the end of *Worldshaker*, where Riff goes off and leaves Col thinking:

> Col sat on, gazing at the sky. A hundred questions tumbled through his mind. What would he find to do now that the Revolutionary Council was running the juggernaut? How they would get coal from the coaling stations? What would they do for trade? How would the other juggernauts react to the news of the revolution?
> Yet those were only small questions compared to the mystery of Riff and her elusive grin. What did it mean?
> He had the feeling that life would never be predictable again. It was strange that she could make him feel so good and at the same time so insecure. How could he ever know where he was with her?
> 'I guess I'll have to put up with not knowing,' he muttered to himself. And suddenly the thought didn't seem so bad at all.
>
> (THE END)

It's the reverse of the 19th century epilogue—here, the future is completely uncertain. At the same time, though, it's a panoramic view that leaves the immediate situation behind, a rising up and distancing. Or, the kind of summary you have when you're not having a summary.



A note of humour can work too. If humour detaches the reader from emotional involvement, maybe that's also a form of distancing. Here are the last few lines of *The Heavy Crown*, the last book in the *Wolf Kingdom* quartet:

> Hooley Dan gave Chiz another thump on the shoulders. 'Wonderful! So you all have a family—and I have my advisers!'
> 'We may not be very good advisers,' said Tam.
> But a voice piped up at once in his mind. Speak for yourself, said Berkiss. I shall be an excellent adviser. You only have to pass on my knowledge.
> Agger Dagger piped up too. We serve great Cazar! We do heroic duty!
> Only Bella didn't have much to say. *Zzzzzz. Zzzzzz. Zzzzzz.* She had gone back to sleep again.
>
> (THE END)

That's a sort of deliberately flip, sidestep sort of ending, nipping off the storyline with a tweak.

3. Climax & After

(vii) BEGINNING AGAIN

And now there's the sequel to launch off with a new beginning. Aghhh! Every problem of beginning a novel is ten times worse when it's a sequel.

First, the story of the previous novel has now become backstory for this one—an additional mass of material to incorporate. Second, there's no telling how much of this material individual readers are going to need. Readers who read the first novel long ago or who haven't read it at all will be floundering if there isn't enough explanation supplied; readers who've only just read the first novel will be irritated at being force-fed what they already know. No way can you keep everyone happy!

If there's a reliable solution to the problem, I hope someone will tell me—I've never found it. I just try all the harder to fit in even more backstory even more smoothly and naturally.

The only alternative I know is the type of prologue that summarises all the developments of the previous novel. The advantage here is that the text is optional, you don't have to read it if you don't want to. The disadvantage—speaking from my own experience—is that I never want to. Even if I've forgotten everything about the previous novel, I'd still rather take my chances of picking it up as I go along.

The fact is that summary-type prologues are about as much fun to read as instructions for installing a hi-fi system. One dry indigestible sentence after another. It's harder work than eating a heaped bowl of All Bran. Beyond half a page, my mind refuses to take in any more.

And yet … by the time I got to the third book of the Ferren trilogy, there was an impossible amount of accumulated backstory. I couldn't incorporate it, so I had to use a summary-type prologue. I did it the way they do "The Story So Far …" for magazine serials, that is, character by character. Like this:

> ASMODAI When the War Council of archangels allowed Satan and his followers back into Heaven, Asmodai also pretended to repent. But he still harboured plans of domination, and has now rejected Heaven for the second time.
>
> DOCTOR SANIETTE … etc

You get the idea. Backstory material is maybe a tiny bit more digestible when it's broken up and pinned to one character at a time. But I'd only ever do it in desperation, and I haven't had to do it again since.

4. Momentum

(i) 2 KINDS OF MOMENTUM

Telling a good story is the bottom line for a genre writer. If you can't keep the reader turning the pages, you're nowhere.

Narrative momentum comes down to two basic urges: the urge to find out what will happen next, and the urge to find out what has happened in the past. The writer creates a lean towards further event or towards the solution of a mystery.

A mystery requires a gap in the present state of affairs. Why is Alan acting in this inexplicable way? Why does N'Drath deliberately avoid speaking to Kellon? There must have been a cause—what was it?

The lean towards what-will-happen-next isn't so different. It's true, the reader may simply read on for more of the same. In Nikki Gemmell's *The Bride Stripped Bare*, the sex scenes we've already read lead us to expect more sex scenes to come. But the kind of lean I'm thinking about is the lean you get when you're waiting for a sex scene that hasn't even happened. Not more of the same but something different.

People who look down their noses at 'mere' story (yes, you know who you are, you literary types!) think of story as linear, one event following another, like a string of sex scenes. No! A hundred times no! Story is the unfolding of one event out of another.

A present situation in a novel should be a vector, an arrow towards the future. A respectable relationship between two people now may hold promise of a passionate relationship to come. We interpret the implications, we foresee developments.

Here's a thought-experiment. If you're in the middle of reading a novel, put it aside and imagine that the remaining pages have been obliterated forever … then consider all the potentialities. If A does this, then B will do that; if B does that, it'll push C over the edge; or if B does something else, then D and E will find out; if D and E find out, they'll turn on F… etc etc. Nothing's happening, yet everything's ready to happen.

Is it a story? Maybe only half a story, with the element of ongoing time removed. Yet the other element of story is still there—the element of causal interdependence.

Often, our expectations are indefinite. The sex-and-romance situation I just sketched suggests a fairly specific outcome, but with many situations we could hardly predict developments in the future. We only know that the present situation is unstable and something has to happen.

If you think of story as a line of one event after another, then reading a story will seem a very passive experience. Readers simply lie back and let events roll over them. That's the view of the anti-narrative literary types. But, if I'm right, then reading a story involves interpreting, questioning, looking ahead. Good exercise for adult minds, good training for kids—any story is good!

But that's an argument for another day …

4. Momentum

(ii) BUILD-UP

Here's a rule of thumb for ordering what-happens-next in stories: have the bigger event unfold out of the smaller. Similarly when ordering revelations in mystery-stories: start with the smaller and work up to the bigger.

I wish I had some measure for smaller and bigger. It doesn't help much to say, proceed from the less interesting to the more interesting, from the less remarkable to the more remarkable. I don't think there are any general criteria. In one novel, the resolution of a relationship involving two people can top the resolution of a battle involving millions; vice versa in another.

My only advice is, rely on your own sense of what's more or less interesting. And my only other advice is, check with sample readers and see how they feel.

It's a rule of thumb, so it needs to be applied most of the time rather than all of the time, with qualifications. Other things being equal, build up from the smaller to the bigger. And even then, you'll want to vary the pattern locally, occasionally.

On the other hand, you risk anti-climax if you disregard it on the scale of the novel as a whole. If the most interesting revelation occurs half way through, with only a lesser revelation at the climax, then you've got a problem. Likewise if the reader is expecting an even more remarkable event to unfold out of previous events, and you only produce something flat and predictable—problem again!

Anti-climax is what you get when a build-up fails to go up.

Locally, smaller-before-bigger is a good rule to bear in mind, rather than apply inflexibly. Harking back to my example of local action earlier —in a duel with rapiers, you'd aim to have the less desperate moments occurring before the more desperate moments.

So, early on, the hero avoids his opponent's blade by a hairsbreadth; later on, he has his rapier twisted out of his hand and has to go scrabbling for it as his opponent nearly delivers the coup de grace.

Or, harking back to my example of local creeping revelation—if Tam and Nina start by believing the ruined monastery deserted and end up by discovering it's inhabited, you'd tend to put the less obvious clues before the more obvious clues.

Thus, early on, a faint smell of smokiness in the air (could be from many causes other than a fire for cooking); later on, a footprint (human, but could be a passing hunter, and not recent); later again, the sound of a door handle turning (only one interpretation now!)

Ordering events or revelations is an exercise I do in creative writing workshops. It combines well with 'chunking' (ACTION (vi)).

4. Momentum

(iii)TWISTS

The urge to find out what will happen or had happened keeps us turning the pages, and, as I said, we sometimes form fairly definite expectations. That doesn't mean we look to have our expectations confirmed in the end. There's a different kind of satisfaction when the ultimate event or revelation completely overturns expectations. This is the shock of the narrative twist.

We're very fond of having the rug pulled out from under our feet nowadays. Genres that thrive on twists—crime, spy, legal thrillers, conspiracy/political thrillers—have all become very popular over the last half-century. By the same token, we're also more prepared for twists, and not so easily taken by surprise.

Guessing the twists can be a sort of game between author and reader. That is, the reader forms expectations on the basis of previous twists in previous books and movies, rather than on the basis of the actual characters and situations. You pick the least likely person as the killer not because of any reasons out in the fictional world, but because you know this is the way the detective genre usually works.

I'm not sure this is a good thing. As an author, I want to immerse the reader in the characters' experience, not have the reader sitting off to the side, calculating the odds on a different level. Still, you have to reckon with this as something most readers will bring to their reading.

How much does it matter to take the reader by surprise? In some genres, like romance, the final conclusion is never in doubt. Instead, the interest likes in how things unfold along the way.

Fantasy, traditionally, has never been the most obvious place to find twists. Fantasy has tended to be a what-next kind of genre, whereas the most surprising twists tend to arise over what-has-happened. But there are plenty of exceptions … and who knows? maybe the Harry Potter books have changed the template forever.

4. Momentum

(iv) GUESSING IS NOT KNOWING

I'm normally slow at guessing twists. I like to think it's because I'm immersed in the characters' world (but maybe it's because I'm dumb!). Anyway, one time I was smart was when watching *The Sixth Sense*, the Bruce Willis/Hayley Joel Osment movie. I guessed the truth of the situation way ahead of almost everyone else. Did it spoil the movie? No—because it was no more than a wild, out-on-limb guess. When it turned out right, I wasn't disappointed at all. There's a vast difference between guessing and knowing.

Feedback from sample readers is very important to me, which is why I keep babbling on about it. However, I don't necessarily trust the answers to questions like 'when did you first guess that there was more than one serial killer?' I still ask the question, but I adjust for the fact that people tend to pre-date the time of their correct guesses.

Perhaps it's because most of us hate to appear less smart than the next person, but I suspect it's more because we always entertain a whole host of possibilities in our minds as we read. When one possibility turns out right twenty chapters later, that possibility looms much larger in retrospect than it was in our minds at the time. Unconsciously, we persuade ourselves it was the only one floating around.

When I ask for feedback in relation to a twist, I'm happiest when some readers answer, yeah, guessed it ahead, and others answer, no, didn't have a clue. I take that as meaning it was neither knowable nor absolutely unguessable. And although people's answers appear so black or white, I'd bet their actual experience was fairly similar.

If absolutely nobody formed even a momentary guess at a forthcoming twist, I'd start to wonder whether I'd prepared the groundwork properly. I think the best twists are when the groundwork has been prepared but hardly any readers spotted it. I like a twist that snaps into place, when you cast back and realise, of course! it was there all along. Not so convincing if the author has to fill in large amounts of explanation afterwards.

The worst twists are when what's suddenly revealed never does genuinely fit with what went before. Movies can get away with half-baked twists to some extent, but a reader has more time to make connections and can't be so easily fooled. Or shouldn't be fooled. You have to have some respect for your reader!

4. Momentum

(V) MOMENTUM ACROSS CHAPTER BREAKS

I used to think of chapters like boxes, containing a certain amount of material. Now I think of them as channels through which the story pours. Too much completion at the end of a chapter kills narrative momentum.

I guess the extreme of non-completion would be the cliffhanger. There's a sort of convention that allows you to end a chapter at the very moment where it ought not to end. Here are the final lines of Chapter 51 in *The Black Crusade*:

> [Raveena] shrieked in triumph. But the casket slipped from her grip with the violence of the blow. In slow, slow motion it tilted and fell to the floor.
> 'Let's go!'
> I foresaw the crash, the breaking glass, the escape of the essence. I tried to pull Volusia away, but she was staring in horrified fascination.
> Then the casket hit the floor, and the world was changed forever.

End of chapter! A frozen moment. The reader has to turn to Chapter 52 to see what happened next.

I like cliffhangers, but not all the time. A cliffhanger at the end of every chapter looks too deliberate, too artificial. What's more, a cliffhanger at the end of one chapter puts an action peak at the start of the next chapter—which can lead to an undesirable mid-chapter trough.

I think it's okay for the local action to wrap up at the end of a chapter, so long as there are deeper currents pushing on ahead. For example, Harry and Cath find a site to camp, put up their tent, talk and fall asleep. It's hard to avoid some sort of break when your characters fall asleep. But there needs to be unfinished business! Perhaps Harry and Cath talk about the goal of their journey, perhaps they're becoming romantically involved, perhaps they argue and store up resentments. Perhaps all three …

A cliffhanger raises a question that receives an answer at the start of the next chapter. The deeper currents I'm suggesting may be left behind at the start of the next chapter, only receiving an answer over several chapters. But we still have to keep turning the pages to see how things turn out.

4. Momentum

(vi) CHAPTER LENGTH

What I've been saying about the breaks between chapters also applies to the breaks between sections inside a chapter—except that it would be more unusual to have a cliffhanger between sections.

I'm fond of very short chapters without sections. Often chapters of only 3 to 6 pages, the length of other people's sections. I'm writing what I enjoy reading—always a good principle!—and I know very short chapters suck me in.

I suppose the idea of, say, a twenty pages chapter divided into half a dozen sections is that the reader doesn't stop at the end of a section but keeps going through to the end of the chapter. True enough, it works that way for me. But, when I do reach the end of a twenty-page chapter, it's like a finishing post, goal achieved—and I stop dead.

What sucks me in with very short chapters is the temptation to read just one more. Only a few pages … so I read it, and then there's the next chapter holding out the same temptation. It can suck me in over and over again, until I lose all track of time.

That's me as a reader. As a writer, I like the way very short chapters tend to set up a rhythm. Writing becomes very easy for me when I find that rhythm.

The advantage of sections is that they're far more flexible. You can have one section over twenty pages long followed by another section under twenty lines long. Not conducive to a rhythm, but there are times when these lengths come in very handy. It would look odd to have chapters varying so much in length.

I've come to a sort of compromise in the novel I'm writing at the moment: short rather than very short chapters, with very occasional section breaks. Occasional in the sense of only in a third or half of my chapters, and rarely more than once in a chapter. I'm happy with it so far.

5. Pacing

(i) MAKING TIME PASS

Word-time isn't story-time. A novel can take 1,000 words over an event that lasts 10 seconds, or 10 words over events that last 100 days. My natural instinct is for film-like, moment-by-moment presentation—I write dramatic scenes very easily. I find it harder to move quickly over time, covering days or months or weeks in relatively few words.

I guess that's why the time-span of my stories tends to contract rather than expand. I have no difficulty in making things happen faster, compressing events into a smaller number of days. Most of my novels take place within a couple of weeks, a couple of months at most.

It's when I have to move quickly over time that I get nervous and start to baulk.

Similarly within dramatic scenes … there are always places where you need to move more quickly over time. Repeated actions, for example. If Harry is setting up a tent on stony ground, you can do a moment-by-moment presentation of the difficulty of driving a tent peg in—searching for a convenient crack, cursing, swinging the mallet. Fine. But there are still at least another three tent pegs to deal with. Do you really want to go through the same moment-by-moment presentation again and again?

There's a similar problem when characters are walking across a landscape and encountering strange sights—which is a very common scenario for fantasy writers. The trouble is the length of walking-time between a first distant impression and a final close-up. All the way, the impression keeps coming clearer—but how many moments of coming clearer do you want? You need a way of moving quickly to the close-up.

I know only two basic strategies for moving quickly over time. One is to tell the passage of time, the other is to let time lapse in gaps.

5. Pacing

(ii) LETTING TIME LAPSE

A break between chapters or sections is like a cut between scenes in a film. The presentation stops, then starts up again. It can start up in the next second, or half an hour, a day, a month or a year later. (Sometimes it can go backwards in time, but that's another issue.) We pick up the new time as we pick up the story again.

If you need time to pass, it's very easy to let it leak out through the gaps between chapters and sections. Time moves on in the intervals when we weren't watching.

For a large lapse of time, it helps if you can make a double break with an intervening chapter or section. For example, the story of Alma and Dorey breaks off in June, we spend a chapter following the story of Dirk and Torri, then come back to the story of Alma and Dorey—three months later. When you have multiple narrative strands for cross-cutting between, it's easy to let time lapse.

The intervening material principle also works within scenes. Take the journey across a landscape. Arina looks up and sees an oddly shaped rock in the distance; then lapses into her own thoughts about the family she's left behind, the welcome she hopes to receive at the end of her quest, whatever … when she comes back to the outside world, hey presto! she's so close to the rock she can see that it's actually a sculpture in the shape of a gigantic eagle.

The thoughts you gave her wouldn't actually have lasted for the whole time she'd have taken to walk all that distance. Nonetheless, we accept that time slipped by while our attention was elsewhere.

An interlude of dialogue can work in the same way. After Harry has hammered in the first tent peg, Cath could chat to him talking to him about what to cook up for dinner. Meanwhile, he continues to work, undescribed, and we come back to the action only as he finishes hammering in the last peg.

Again, it doesn't matter whether the dialogue is really long enough to cover the whole period of time needed for the job.

5. Pacing

(iii) TELLING OVER TIME LONG-TERM

I've just written a chapter where I needed to cover a whole twelve months. I was dreading it in advance, but ended up enjoying it. I must be getting over my fear of time-passing …

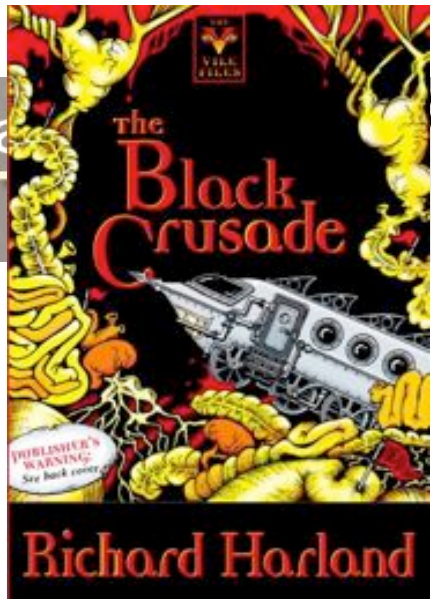
One thing I discovered is that time passes better if you have significant changes to tell. Obvious, really. (Maybe this is a tip that nobody needs but me.) In previous novels, I've often needed weeks to go past without needing anything much to happen. Mistake!

In the chapter I've just written, I had a war to tell and unusual seasonal weather. But most of all, I had kids growing up, changes in families, new relationships, new group dynamics and new group interests. Twelve months was hardly enough to tell it all!

I guess I had the advantage of a wider village society to draw upon. Big changes involving the protagonist would normally receive dramatic presentation, but big changes involving minor characters and background are suitable for telling.

The beauty of having big changes to tell is that the reader genuinely experiences time going past. (I think, I hope!) When I've tried to make time pass with nothing much happening, I've always had the nagging suspicion that the reader won't be convinced. My editor for *Worldshaker* missed a whole day going past in one part of the novel—I'd mentioned it, but I hadn't made it real. I did some re-arranging of the story so that there was something important happening on every day.

Another thing I discovered—though not recently—is that little snippets of half-scene can liven up a chapter (or section) of telling over time.



> Hillida continued with her matchmaking program for Everil and Flor, and Seriah continued to get twisted up inside over it. But nothing happened.
> 'Thinks too much of himself, that one!' Hillida huffed in frustration, after Everil had yet again ignored the opportunities put in his path. 'Thinks he's too good for anyone!'
> Seriah was inclined to agree; there was an air of quiet conceit about Everil, though he never said anything arrogant.

No full scene, just a flicker, in and out—but it varies the monotony of endless paragraphs of telling. Dialogue or a line of speech is perfect for the purpose.

5. Pacing

(iv) TELLING OVER TIME LOCALLY

For changing pace and telling over time within a dramatic scene, you need to back off from moment-by-moment presentation:

> For the next ten minutes, Harry was busy hammering in the remaining tent pegs.
>
> It took him ten minutes to hammer in the other tent pegs.
>
> Over the next twenty minutes, the rock took on a sharper form. It was even odder than she'd first thought …

Naming an amount of time works, and so do vague equivalents like 'a long while'. Or you can back off to an out-of-the-moment level of understanding:

> It was even more difficult finding cracks for the next three pegs. By the time he'd finished, Harry was sweating …
>
> Harry hit his thumb another five times before he finished the job.
>
> Volusia returned to the iron box without a struggle. (*The Black Crusade*)

Here, you've shifted from a focus on the action to a focus on something about the action. Not hammering in the tent pegs, but the ease or difficulty of hammering in the

tent pegs. It's a sleight of hand, like the magician who draws the audience's attention away from where the trick is really happening.

There are many other angles you can work. As an exercise in creative writing workshops, I give out the texts of separate dramatic moments, then challenge the participants to invent ways of bridging quickly and smoothly from one to another. I usually end up learning more than I teach.

5. Pacing

(v) PACING IN CHAPTERS

When I need to make time pass, I often do it at the beginning of a chapter. The beginning of a section would work equally well. It seems more natural to take up a new pace when starting up again after a break. That is, the new pace of telling over time in several paragraphs.

I never have any trouble zooming in smoothly from telling to dramatic presentation, it's the zoom out I don't like. When a chapter has involved the reader in moment-by-moment action, it feels like a lowering of intensity to tell over the following hour or afternoon—without a break.

The break makes all the difference. The first paragraphs after a break can be a getting ready and gearing up again.

For example, if one chapter ends with Harry and Cath falling asleep in their tent, the next can start by rapidly telling over events in the morning … getting dressed, cooking, washing, packing up the tent, all the things you probably don't want to dwell on. Then you can zoom in when Harry and Cath set off again, and build to a scene of some dramatic encounter, some exciting or important action.

Side-note. Of course, it would be monotonous if every chapter started in the same way. Better to ring the changes: sometimes a plunge into the action, sometimes a character's non-dramatic thinking, sometimes dialogue with no named speakers for several lines … and sometimes, telling. Variety is the great principle!

For me, slipping in several paragraphs of telling-over-time is easy at the beginning of a chapter, difficult in the middle and second easiest as the end. Material at the end doesn't break the back of the chapter's trajectory, but comes in as a sort of end-piece.

Here are the last few paragraphs of a schoolroom chapter in *Worldshaker* –

> Mr Gibber yawned and sat behind his desk. From time to time, he reached down to his wastepaper basket and appeared to be patting something inside.
> 'That's Murgatrude.' Hythe leaned forward to whisper from behind. 'The Gibber's pet.'
> Murgatrude made a deep rumm-rumm sound, somewhere between the purr of a cat and the growl of a dog.
> The afternoon wore on. Fefferley and Haugh took pillows out of their desks, laid down their heads and fell fast asleep. Some students amused themselves by flicking little inked balls of blotting paper at one another; some tried to repel the attacks by building defensive walls of books on their desks.
> Still Col couldn't get the memory of Riff completely out of his mind.

Lowering intensity—but you can wind down at the end of a chapter, just as you can wind down at the end of a whole novel.

LANGUAGE

Sub-sections & Pages

1. POWERS OF LANGUAGE
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(ii) THE IMPOSSIBLE
(iii) THE LANGUAGE OF EMOTION
(iv) CIRCLING ROUND A MYSTERY

2. PERSON & TENSE
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(ii) FIRST PERSON COMPRESSION
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3. STYLE
(i) STYLE AS MEANS OR END

1. Powers of Language

(i) THE UNSEEABLE

I'm back onto an old theme: the difference between what language can do and what the visual media can do. It makes for a good lead-in, at least. Here's part of a passage I used to show to creative writing students.

> The trapdoor was weighed down with silt. It took half a dozen hands all pushing together to heave it open. Outside the sky was blue and the sun was shining.
> The People clambered out and stood around blinking. There was a cover of soft brown soil over the Home Ground, over the Plain, over everything. All fresh and wet and new. It was like the very first morning of the world. The ground steamed with vapour in the warm sunlight.
> Ferren took a deep breath. He looked out over the Plain, where the battle had been. There were no signs now of wrecked machines or burnt grass or black bodies. Instead there were small mounds and low moulded hills. The landscape had been smoothed over and made gentle. Even Beaumont Street and the other clumps of ruins had been flattened and buried, just like the Home Ground.

That's from *Ferren and the Angel*. I know, because I wrote it, that the author was trying to be as film-like as possible. Yet it's full of interpretations and understandings that can't be directly seen.

For example: 'There were no signs now of wrecked machines or burnt grass or black bodies.' You can't directly see a negative. You can see what's there, small mounds and low moulded hills, but you can't see what's been taken away. Nor can you see a previous state of the landscape now covered over, the old Home Ground and the buried ruins.

Then there's the simile: 'It was like the very first morning of the world.' How could you see that? The film would need to superimpose one image on top of another.

Or how about this? 'It took half a dozen hands all pushing together to heave it open.' You can see hands pushing, but can you actually see that it took half a dozen of them?

Of course, a film director will find ways to encourage an audience to make the desired interpretations. You can prompt what you can't show. But language does the job directly.

1. Powers of Language

(ii) THE IMPOSSIBLE

Language can encompass not only the unseeable but also the out-and-out impossible. Working through words, we can get our minds across paradoxical states of existence that defy ordinary perception.

I remember volunteering in a stage hypnotist show. I had a fruit in my hand that I was told was a nice juicy apple, when really it was a lemon. I'm sure my eyes saw it as a lemon, but my mind knew it as an apple. It was still an apple in my mind when I sank my teeth into it. Luckily I didn't get far through the peel!

Speculative fiction typically deals with paradoxical states of existence. Magic and mysticism in fantasy; the supernatural in horror; and counter-intuitive, trans-dimensional experiences in SF. Paradoxical language is a vital tool for the spec fic writer.

One of my favourite examples comes in Ursula le Guin's *The Farthest Shore*, the third book in the original Earthsea trilogy. At the end of chapter 3, a tall lord of shadows appears, holding in his hand a tiny flame no larger than a pearl which is eternal life. A flame like a pearl, okay, that's a striking simile; but the flame-pearl isn't just similar to eternal life—the one is absolutely identified with the other. It's impossible, it's beautiful—and it's stayed with me since I last read the book more than twenty years ago.

There are other easier magical, mystical, supernatural and trans-dimensional effects. Explosions of light, jags of blue-white energy, shimmers and auras. All of these can be done impressively in the visual media too. But how could you film the identity of eternal life and a tiny flame?

It's the mind-bending effects I love above all. Things that are both there and not there, things that are in two states at the same time, etc, etc. To invent such forms of magic,

mysticism and the supernatural seems to me the highest order of imagination, and to persuade the reader of their reality, the highest order of writing skill.

1. Powers of Language

(iii) THE LANGUAGE OF EMOTION

You can't film feelings inside a character, but you can describe feelings in words. The difficulty is to describe them in a way that draws the reader into the immediacy of the experience.

Abstract terms are only a starting-point: excitement, bitterness, shame, regret. Or, she felt bitter, he was ashamed. Fine, so far as it goes—but the reader is still on the outside.

Verbs are the best bet when you want to convey the feel of a feeling. A feeling tingles, glows, soars, swoops, sinks, lifts, shrinks, swells, twists, tightens, pulls out thin … But, grammatically, verbs can't exist on their own. They need a noun to do the tingling, glowing, soaring, swooping, etc. But how can you say what thing moves with these movements?

The traditional language of the emotions relies on traditional internal organs.

> Her heart sank, soared, swelled …
> His stomach tightened, clenched, churned …
> [The feeling] tingled, fluttered along her nerves…
> [The feeling] thrilled, burned in his veins…

Maybe the traditional language was based on pre-scientific beliefs about particular organs as the seats of particular emotions. Nowadays, well … maybe fear is centred in the stomach, but no one would think that hearts literally sink with disappointment or swell with elation. The naming of internal organs really says nothing except that the movement of the feeling was inside.

So, yes, these phrases are clichés, many of them used a trillion times before. Does it matter? If anyone can think of something else to sink other than a heart, I'll be forever in your debt. In the meanwhile, I'll keep using phrases like 'Her heart sank' or 'Fear twisted a knot in the pit of his stomach,' maybe adding a simile to freshen them up a little. I don't see any alternative.

However, I'll never use a phrase like, 'Desire burned in his veins'. That's corny as well as a cliché. Although language gives us the power to describe emotions, it's not an easy power to wield!

(More about clichés on the "Style As End Or Means" page of the Style section.)

1. Powers of Language

(iv) CIRCLING ROUND A MYSTERY

Another special power of language depends on the fact that sentences only pay attention, only focus on foreground. You can use this with calculated perversity to pay attention to everything except what the reader most wants to know—like a narrow beam of light circling around a central darkness.

Short stories often make great use of this technique. You circumscribe and define the shape of the most important fact before every allowing it to come clear. Two classic Australian examples would be Margo Lanagan's "Singing My Sister Down" (in Black Juice) , where the crucial realisation takes half a dozen pages to come clear, and Terry Dowling's "The Last Elephant" (in An Intimate Knowledge of the Night) where full realisation arrives only on the final page.

For full-length fiction, this power of language is probably at its best in journal-type presentation. The format might be an old-fashioned journal or letters, it might be a contemporary blog or emails—either way, the essential feature is that the person recording looks back on something that has only just happened. It's retrospective, but not across the whole span of the story, as with a standard 1st-person narrator. The recording moves forward and casts back a little bit at a time.

Here's Jonathan Harker writing in his journal while at Count Dracula's castle:

> Later: the Morning of 16 May.—God preserve my sanity, for to this I am reduced. Safety and assurance of safety are things of the past. Whilst I live on here there is but one thing to hope for: that I may not go mad, if indeed, I be not mad already. If I be sane, then surely it is maddening to think that of all the foul things that lurk in this hateful place the Count is the least dreadful to me; that to him alone I can look for safety, even though this be only whilst I can serve his purpose. Great God! merciful God! Let me be calm, for out of that way lies madness indeed. I begin to get new lights on certain things which have puzzled me. Up to now, I never quite knew what Shakespeare meant when he made Hamlet say:
>
> My tablets! quick, my tablets!
>
> 'Tis meet that I put it down,' etc.
>
> for now, feeling as though my own brain were unhinged or as if the shock had come which must end in its undoing, I turn to my diary for repose. The habit of entering accurately must help to soothe me.
>
> The Count's mysterious warning frightened me at the time; it frightens me more now …

I chose a *Dracula* passage because the technique works so well with horror. The recorder keeps circling around and around what happened, in the meanwhile communicating emotion and generating mood. A feeling waiting for its cause!

It's a great moment to zoom in on, when perception is in the past, emotional response is in the present and full comprehension and belief are yet to come. Only language can do it, because the very act of turning experience into written (or typed) language is an act of understanding and making things clear to yourself.

The 'I' narrator addesses audience

2. Person & Tense

(i) THE 'I' NARRATOR

First person narration is when an 'I' tells the story. There's a whole range of options between the 'I' who seems to be setting down the story like a writer and the 'I' who seems to be recounting the story orally, in a live situation

The writer-type narrator is someone who has experienced the events of the story but now organises them with distance and control. Dialogue is 'recreated' in full, description is developed, action is clearly visualised.

The oral-type narrator conveys an impression of speaking face-to-face with a listener or small audience. Typically, this kind of presentation is much more personal and quirky. The narrator has a distinctive way of speaking, individual mannerisms and attitudes that colour everything s/he says.

The subjectivity of an oral-type narrator is always liable to override the 'objective' standards of storytelling. This 'I' will admit to events not seen, and pass over them. Instead of unfolding the story chronologically, s/he may jump back and forth across time; instead of holding back facts for suspense and mystery, s/he may blurt them out in advance.

Of course, the 'I' narrator's accidents are still deliberate on the part of the real author behind the scenes. The real author knows the exact effect of those 'blurts', which may be actually working as teasers—or red herrings.

With this kind of presentation, the listener is also part of the equation. As in a real face-to-face recounting, the 'I' is aware of the person or people s/he's addressing, and tries to cajole them, contradict them, redirect them, draw them in.

> So you think that'd make him one of the angels? No, he was a …
>
> I've met plenty of nutters in my job, but believe me, you've never seen anything like this kid …

Addressing the listener (who is actually the reader) creates a whole further level of play.

This doubling of level is another special possibility of language. On the one hand, the past events recounted; on the other, the present situation of the recounter and the listener. Sometimes, the present situation may become a second story in its own right, and even a second story that wraps around and interacts with the first. For example, the murderer who has revealed himself in his story ends up threatening his audience with a similar fate. Or, the listeners are judges who finally pass sentence on the basis of what they/you have heard.

2. Person & Tense

(ii) FIRST PERSON COMPRESSION

I've heard it said that telling a story as an 'I' can be dangerous for beginning writers because it encourages rambling and digression. I've never had that problem because I'm a non-digressive sort of writer. But it makes sense, especially if you use an 'I' narrator who's close to you in voice and personality.

On the other hand, first person narration has the potential to work in exactly the opposite way—it can make compression easy. Third person narration, as more impersonal, tends to show events in an even, measured way. But when a first person narrator is telling the story, you can zoom in on what's important because this person finds it important.

As for the rest, it's easy to cut and skim on the basis of subjective say-so—

> Nothing much happened for the next five months …
>
> I saw the other side of him four weeks later, at the staff Xmas party …

It works best when you have a strong sense of the narrator's personality, which often means an 'I' at the oral/subjective end of the spectrum.

True, similar cutting and skimming is possible in third person narration—

> Nothing much happened to Jonathan for the next five months. Then he met a friend of Tara's at a rock concert in the Domain …

I don't know, but it sounds better to me when a first person narrator, who takes responsibility for the arbitrariness, does this casual flipping-over-time.

Since compression is at a premium in short stories, and first person narration makes compression easy, it's natural to find a great many short stories told by an 'I'. I've never done a count, but I'd bet that first person narration is more common in 10 page short stories than 500 page novels.

If for some reason I wanted to reduce a novel to the length of a novella, or a novella to the length of a short story, I'd look at the possibility of switching from third person to first person narration.

In fact, the advantages of an 'I' narrator at the oral/subjective end of the spectrum may not be so advantageous for long fiction. Colourful phrasings, a distinctive personality, interacting with listeners face-to-face—all of these add interest in a short story. But what's interesting over ten pages can become cloying over five hundred. How many times do you want to hear similar mannerisms and attitudes outside of the primary story?

Again, I've never done a count, but I'd bet that 'I' narrators in long novels tend more towards the writerly end of the spectrum, less personal and less quirky in their narrating voices.

2. Person & Tense

(iii) THIRD PERSON

Third person narration is when all the characters appear in the third person as 'she' or 'he'.

Third person has advantages when you want to cover a wide range of scenes and narrative strands. In large-scale fantasy, it's often impossible to arrange for any single narrating character to be present at so many different places and times.

Third person narration is also the natural mode when you want to give equal importance to a number of main characters. First person narration can't avoid privileging the 'I' character over the 'he's' and 'she's'.

What's more, an 'I' can only truly know his or her own thoughts and feelings. Realistically, a single person telling a story must hypothesise about what goes on in

other people's heads. If you want the immediacy of Free Indirect Discourse (see the Free Indirect Discourse page of the "Thinking Inside" section) for a variety of characters, third person narration is the way to go.

(Okay, you can jump between sections told by different first person narrators, but that's more of a literary technique—and still restricts you to one inside view at a time.)

Third person narration is also the way to go if you want a movie-like excitement of dramatic action unfolding before the reader's eyes. Film itself is an impersonal, single level form of presentation. First person narration can have its own energy and excitement, but it's not the observational excitement of a movie.

2. Person & Tense

(iv) PAST OR PRESENT?

Is there any reason why novels are written in the past tense, like history books? A dozen years ago, I wrote the first version of *Ferren and the Angel* in present tense, because I wanted events to unfold like a film before the reader's eyes. So Chapter 1 begins –

> Strange and fearful noises in the night. Daroom! Daroom! Daroom! —a deep down thunder like an endless drum. Then a sharp splitting sound like the crack of a whip: Kratt! Kratt! Kratt! The noises throb through the earth and echo across the sky.
> There are voices too …

But what's unfamiliar can be off-putting and distracting, for publishers and readers. After a few knockbacks from UK publishers, I changed to conventional past tense, and the book was accepted.

I'd still recommend writing a first draft in present tense if you want to train yourself in vivid, dramatic presentation. *Ferren and the Angel* kept its film-like qualities even when rewritten in the past. What's more, the situation has changed since the time of *Ferren and the Angel*.

More and more, we live in a visual media world, where fictions happen as we watch, in the present. Listen to anyone under the age of twenty

and

recounting a story, and they'll so often dramatise it in the present.

> 'So he comes up with this look in his eye, like he's going to flatten me. Then Danny jumps in front, and he starts mouthing off and telling the thug to get lost. Except now the thug's mate's are all coming around …'

Present tense is the natural way to tell a story when you're re-living it intensely. I can't prove it, but I swear there's more present-tense dramatisation in ordinary conversation now than ever before.

Novels have started to change too. My partner has just finished Don Winslow's *The Power of the Dog*, a crime and action story in the present tense. I've just finished James Moloney's *Kill the Possum*, a YA novel also in the present tense. In fact, contemporary children's and YA fiction is especially likely to be written in the present tense. That surely has to be a pointer to the future!

Here's my prediction. In 20 years time, the majority of novels will be written in the present tense.

(But large-scale epic fantasy may be slow to make the change. After all, this is one genre that often wants to look like real history.)

3. Style

(i) STYLE AS MEANS OR END

Style matters. I'm not sure how much it matters to ordinary readers, but it matters to publishers when they're deciding whether or not your MS is publishable. You may have great powers of imagination and story-telling ability, but if your style is clunky in the opening pages, you'll be rejected long before your best qualities come to light.

I don't think much about style myself. I do a lot of retrospective thinking about writing, but I'm scared of giving myself the yips if I worry too closely about my own style. 'Yips' as in golf, when a golfer becomes overly conscious of stance, angle of club head, moment of striking the ball—and ends up in a neurotic tailspin. With some things, it's better to concentrate on the goal. Not the contact of club and ball, but the faraway place where you want the ball to land.

There are forms of writing where style makes a deliberate show of itself. Sure, it's fine if a reader comes away from a short poem thinking, 'what a dazzling use of beautiful language'. But that reaction won't hold up for several hundred pages. With a popular genre novel, it's what comes through the language that counts. You wouldn't want the reader admiring the words at the expense of the content.

Literary critics have a lot to answer for, with their emphasis on perpetual novelty in language. I hate the kind of linguistic 'special effect' that brings the story to a halt while the reader stands back to admire the author's cleverness. A striking simile that sticks out like a sore thumb isn't my idea of good writing. I think the best similes work without being noticed—and the same with all other aspects of style.

At the other extreme are old phrases where the words have clumped together into a single conventional unit. For example

have it all one's own way
stand shoulder to shoulder
keep a straight face
have one's heart in one's mouth
in high spirits
run like the wind
laugh fit to burst
have a soft spot for
fall flat on one's face

Are these clichés? Some literary critics would claim that any use of old phrases is a fate worse than death. I don't see anything so bad about them. Yes, they're conventional, so that we hardly pay attention to the separate words in the phrase ('straight'? 'burst'? 'soft'? 'flat'?) But single words are conventional too. If the phrase does its job, that's good enough for me.

I'm not saying old phrases are ideal, only that we shouldn't be paranoid about avoiding them in genre fiction. Conveying content in a quiet, new way is best, but calling on a well-established conventional phrase is better than straining for novelty.

It's different when a phrase belongs to certain written contexts rather than to ordinary speakers of the language.

desire burned in his veins
'Take me to your leader'

Those are the true clichés, for my money—not just standard phrases, but phrases with corny associations, invoking worn-out fictional contexts.

3. Style

(ii) DO'S & DON'T'S

You don't learn a good fiction-writing style by reading formal documents or newspapers. If you tend to officialese or journalese, you need to read more novels. A

good fiction-writing style is concrete rather than abstract, direct rather than roundabout—and never opts for the safety of impersonal phrasings.

So far, so obvious. The only other advice I know is—keep it varied. Mix up short sentences with long sentences, vary the rhythms of your sentences, take different angles of attack. By 'angles of attack', I mean ways of feeding material through the structure of a sentence.

I don't trust stylistic advice in the form of prohibitions. Two of the popular ones are: avoid passive verbs and avoid adverbs. Okay, you wouldn't want to use too many of either. (Passives, for examples, are more roundabout rather than direct, and often impersonal.) But avoid altogether? That goes against the principle of variety.

I believe that acquiring a good fiction-writing style is about broadening one's range or possibilities and learning more ways of saying things—not about cutting them down. Of course, it's much easier to obey a prohibition and edit things out. Broadening one's range is far more difficult, and there are no neat rules for it.

The prohibition approach to style seems mostly geared to crime fiction and action thrillers. In those genres, yes, a tight-lipped, pared-back sort of style is often what you want. But fantasy isn't a rat-tat-tat sort of genre.

Side-note. Does Bill Gates bully you too? My Microsoft spelling-and-grammar check is always warning me against writing non-sentence fragments when I want to write non-sentence fragments. It also objects when I don't put 'and' before the last item in a list—

> Bells rang, buzzers buzzed, orders were shouted.

Likewise, when I use 'then' as a kind of conjunction—

> He reared up on his knees, then collapsed forward again.

Not to mention the occasional passive sentences that it tries to re-order and make active.

Hah! I stand my ground. I think my spelling-and-grammar check wants to stop me writing fiction. But it won't win. Never surrender!

3. Style

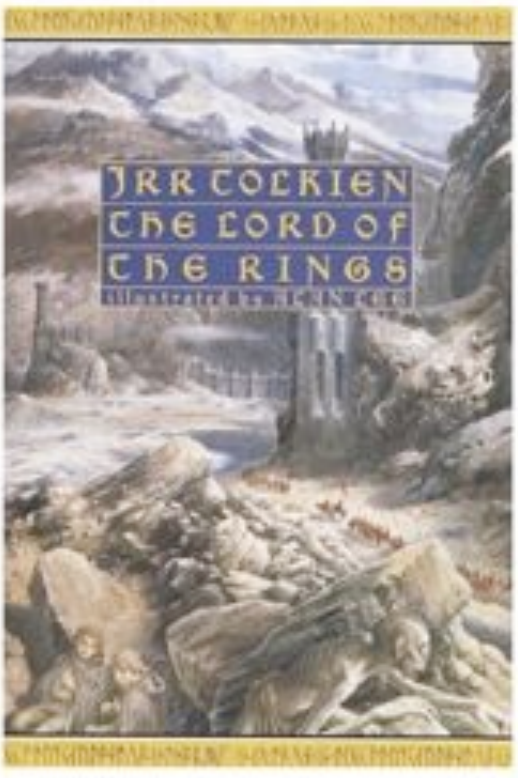
(iii) STYLE IN FANTASY

Fantasy isn't a rat-tat-tat sort of genre, and doesn't go with a hip, contemporary, urban style. In many of its forms, it can afford to be a bit old-fashioned.

When it goes off the rails, it's typically by being too old-fashioned. For my taste, anyway. I don't much like the language in *The Return of the King*, where Tolkien aims at a grand, epic-poetic style.

> Stern now was Éomer's mood, and his mind clear again. He let blow the horns to rally all men to his banner that could come thither; for he thought to make a great shield-wall at the last, and stand, and fight there on foot till all fell, and do deeds of song on the fields of Pelennor, though no man should be left in the West to remember the last King of the Mark. (Chapter VI)
>
> And then [Aragorn] cast the leaves into the bowls of steaming water that were brought to him, and at once all hearts were lightened. For the fragrance that came to each was like a memory of dewy mornings of unshadowed sun in some land of which the fair world in Spring is itself but a fleeting memory. (Chapter VIII)

I guess everyone has their own limits. For me, the style is just too high-flown and consciously archaic. And yet … and yet … it seems much more mannered in brief extracts than when reading through *The Return of the King* as a whole.



I don't much like the language, but does it spoil the last part of *The Lord of the Rings* for me? Not at all. And some of my other favourite fantasies—well, I wouldn't call them exactly well-written. It takes a style as way-out quaint as in *The Worm Ouroboros* to turn me off.

I guess fantasy is a genre, more than any other, where we read beyond the words and into the world. We can overlook a style that's less than perfect, even a little irritating, because the true rewards are elsewhere.

Still, that's no excuse for not improving one's style. I think the best way to improve is not by following rules but by reading and re-reading authors who do use language perfectly. My top three recommendations would be the *Tales of the Otori* series by Liam Hearn, *Tender Morsels* by Margo Lanagan, and *The Book of the New Sun* volumes by Gene Wolfe. (*The Book of the New Sun* has to work as fantasy in the first place, although it may end up as something else.)

What I love about those authors is that their language is so clear and limpid, so deceptively simple. The words allow the colours of the world to shine through.

I was going to give extracts, but I've changed my mind. It would be misleading to focus on local passages of particular beauty. What matters is that these styles can be maintained for hundreds of pages without clotting or cloying—and it's something to be absorbed over hundreds of pages too.

3. Style

(iv) PUNCTUATION & PARAGRAPHS

My advice on punctuation is advice vis-a-vis publishers—and especially advice to myself vis-a-vis publishers. The trouble is, I like using italics and dashes and exclamation marks (as in these writing tips), but most publishers frown on them.

I guess the rationale is that these forms of punctuation are mere add-on devices for creating emphasis and excitement, whereas the job ought to be done by the words themselves. I don't have an argument against that. I guess italics and dashes and exclamation marks can be a lazy author's option. Only I don't think I'm a lazy author, and I still want to use them!

However, most publishers have a definite down on them, and some are allergic to the mere look of a page sprinkled with italics and/or dashes and/or exclamation marks. This is worth bearing in mind if you're submitting without a reputation to back you up. Better to play it safe and use those forms of punctuation only where you have to, not where you'd like to.

(There was a great moment in a TV version of Mrs Gaskell's 19th century novel, Cranford, that I saw recently - one sweet old lady discussing a letter received from a friend: "She wrote in a state of great distress. There were (hushed pause) exclamation marks.")

Similarly with other special forms of punctuation such as ellipses (…) and parentheses (brackets). I don't like the look of parentheses in novels myself, even though I use them all the time in emails and letters. What's the big difference?

It's probably just a convention, but so is spelling—and look at how annoyed people can get over non-conventional spelling. If you don't want to put publishers offside before they even start reading, keep ellipses to a minimum and avoid parentheses altogether.

As for paragraphs, in popular fiction you'll be looking to keep them short, a few lines or a few sentences. I like writing short paragraphs as much as I like reading them, so this isn't a problem for me.

The only material I have to work at breaking up is description. Ironically, this is exactly where I don't want long unbroken chunks of text, because description tends to be low on momentum already. It helps to splice description with action or a character's inner thoughts or reactions.

One thing I've noticed is that very short sentences seem to go best at the beginning or end of a paragraph. Here's Col in *Worldshaker*:

> … He opened his mouth and let the freshness fill his lungs.
>
> They had come out onto a platform above the Bridge. All around were masts and wires, which sighed and sang in the wind. Col watched half a dozen small puffs of cloud—so close, it seemed he could reach out and touch them. He could have stayed there for ever, just feeling the sun and air on his face. It was like sailing in the sky.
>
> But already his grandfather was striding forward to …

Maybe very short sentences would interrupt the flow in the middle of a paragraph, maybe they're especially effective for kicking a paragraph off or snapping a paragraph shut. Actually, I don't know what it means. I only mention it because I've noticed myself doing it.

3. Style

(v) TITLES

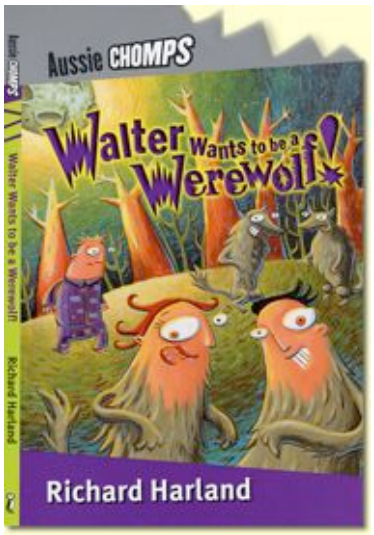
Titles are my greatest bugbear. Sometimes, my first-off working title for a novel just clicks and stays with the book all the way through. These are usually obvious titles in terms of the book's content, but interesting enough to appeal on the bookshop shelves. For example: *The Vicar of Morbing Vyle*, *Sassycat*, *The Black Crusade*. But if a title doesn't pop into my head from the start, I have real difficulty creating one later.

Long ago, in Good Writing Habits, I was very confident about 'creating into a space'. Something always comes if you hold your mind open, I said. Well, it does for me when I need some inspiration to fill a space inside the story. With titles, on the other hand, my mind can stay open and uninspired forever.

How much does it matter to come up with a great title? In one respect, not much at all, since a publisher can always change the title on you anyway. In the great division of responsibilities, what goes on the book's cover counts as marketing and therefore publisher's business. If the publisher suspects that your title won't work on the bookshop shelves, they'll come up with—or ask you to come up with—another one that will. Sad but true. Or at least, sad for every author who believes in their own title-creating abilities.

Still, you want your MS title to attract a publisher, regardless of whether it gets the chance to attract the reading public. A good title needs to do two things: capture attention, and announce the kind of book it is.

I was always pleased with *Walter Wants to be a Werewolf!* as my title for a kids' fantasy—one title I did create at a later stage. It's certainly striking, and it announces humour and kids' book. A title like that would never do for a serious, adult fantasy.



The Dark Edge, my first mainstream publication, was originally titled *The Darkening of Planet P-19*. I felt sure the unusualness of that would capture attention. However, it sends out the message science fiction, and when my publisher wanted to play up the thriller/murder-mystery narrative rather than the SF setting, the title had to change. *The Dark Edge* is clearly more of a thriller/murder-mystery type of title.

The Darkening of Planet P-19 is also a drawn-out, oddball title in a way that suggests literary. Several of my short stories have similar titles: for example, "A Guided Tour in the Kingdom of the Dead", "Ceasing to be Visible", "The Greater Death of Saito Saku". Appropriate enough, since my short stories are often more literary than my novels. But mainstream publishers of fantasy tend to look for something a little plainer.

I'm not proud of my title-creating abilities. For the third book in the Ferren series, I tried out three or four possible titles on friends and acquaintances. The most popular turned out to be *Ferren and the Invasion of Heaven*, overcoming my fears that six words might be too long and awkward. My publisher liked it too, so everyone was happy.

My latest novel, *Worldshaker*, started life as *Leviathan,* then became *Juggernaut*, until my agent suggested that that wasn't striking enough. She was certainly right that 'juggernaut' has featured in previous book and movie titles. So I re-christened this particular juggernaut 'World-Shaker' and made *World-Shaker* the new title. Later, my publisher had a problem with the hyphenated form (hyphens are very rare in titles, don't ask me why), so we changed it to *Worldshaker*.

And now that I've got used to *Worldshaker*, guess what? It truly seems to me the perfect title!

One of the best creators of titles I know is Australian fantasy author, Isobelle Carmody. How about

The Farseekers
A Mystery of Wolves
The Keeping Place
A Fox called Sorrow
The Winter Door
A Riddle of Green
The Stone Key

Simple and beautiful, with just a hint of attention-grabbing strangeness. I'm green with envy!

Isobelle Queen of Titles

4. Naming

(i) THE FEEL OF A NAME

Creating a new world means creating new names: proper nouns for people and places, common nouns for invented things. Sometimes the name might even come first. More than any other kind of writer, a fantasy writer needs to be good at naming. As with everything else, it helps to love what you have to do anyway.

Tolkien is the master, and you can see the love that goes into every name in *The Lord of the Rings*. Famously, Tolkien invented the languages of Middle Earth before he invented Middle Earth itself. Gene Wolfe (Book of the New Sun) is another master,

and so is Australian fantasy writer D.M. Cornish (*Monster Blood Tattoo*). The best way to learn the art of naming is to see how other writers have managed to come up with names that are so evocative, so unexpectedly right.

At the other extreme, there's a website that supplies an alphabetical list of tens of thousands of possible fantasy names. I won't give the address because I hate the idea that naming could ever be such a soulless operation. (If someone would list all the names already taken and used up, names to avoid, now that would be handy.)

Another pet hate: fantasy names that are just syllables thrown together without rhyme or reason, as though any combination of sounds is as good as any other. Worst of all, the pseudo-exotic combinations full of 'k's and 'y's and 'x's, often with hyphens and apostrophes arbitrarily tossed in. No! Every language has its own rhyme and reason, and names in that language must follow the same rhyme and reason.

My favourite example is the English word 'butterfly', which started life as 'flutterby'. When you think about it, 'flutterby' makes excellent descriptive sense, whereas 'butterfly' makes no sense at all. Butterflies aren't flies and have nothing to do with butter. But try saying 'flutterby' a few times, and it's slow and fumbling on the tongue. By contrast, 'butterfly' is neat and snappy with an easy flow. The right sound took over from the right meaning.

Names don't have to be obvious to sound right. A word like 'butterfly' is downright odd. In *Lord of the Rings*, Emyn Muil, Nurn and Ephel Duath are all unusual, yet plausible.

D.M. Cornish almost makes a principle of the unexpected—'Proud Sulking' as the name of a town, for example, or 'fiasco' as the name of a small case or bag used to carry cosmetics. That's playing with fire, and I wouldn't dare do it myself, but, yes, the names have the right feel in spite of their standard associations. It's as though 'fiasco' could have been and should have been the name of a small case or bag used to carry cosmetics!

Unlike an arbitrary collection of syllables, a good name sticks together and sticks in the memory. To pluck an example out of thin air, 'ngambo' is a non-English

combination, but it's perfectly pronounceable. I believe that any invented language, like any real language, has its own natural logic of sounds, and it's the job of the writer to discover that logic. A name has to ring true both in relation to its language and in relation to the person, place or thing that it names.

4. Naming

(ii) MY ATLAS TECHNIQUE

I guess all authors have their own ways of coming up with names. Mine's an accidental by-product of my lifelong love of maps and atlases. The surnames and place-names in my novels are mostly generated from the real names of towns, rivers and hills.

The beauty about an atlas is that I can get names with the same sort of feel by focusing on a particular geographical area. Names in Poland are hugely rich and varied, but they have a different quality to names in Holland and Flanders—or names in Mexico—or names in Turkey. Because I have some very detailed atlases, I can zoom in on villages and tiny landscape features that no reader will ever have heard of.

Still, I'm not after whole names but the roots of names. I write down every name or part-name that has a good, interesting sound—which may or may not be pleasant and mellifluous. Then I start developing, warping and re-combining them. What I'm looking for is a name full of flavour and suggestion that still rings true.

In *The Dark Edge*, I worked from Scottish and Irish names, and came up with places called High Slieve, Ruth-a-Gessy, Loinside, Cree, Winnifer Moor, Draive, East Lair and Lammerland (amongst others). Plenty of variety, a few deliberate oddities …

For first names, I often start from an old university directory of staff names, which has a wide mix of name types and national origins. Again, I play around with possibilities, developing and warping and re-combining. Even the oddly named characters in *Worldshaker*—Ebnolia Porpentine, Sir Wisley Squellingham, Sepahltina Turbot, for example—started life as bits of real names in a directory or (Squellingham and Porpentine) an atlas.

Sometimes a name falls into place almost at once, others take a lot of mulling over. Preparing for a novel, I keep a separate folder of possible names and roots for names. I find that the roots for names often slip across between place-names and character names, so I don't like to categorize the possibilities until they're fixed.

Fixing a name is a big step. For practical reasons, I've sometimes had to change a name at the last minute—e.g. when someone tells me it's been used in another book. Nothing easier on the computer: I just run through the whole MS with the Find-and-

Replace command. But getting the original name out of my head is almost impossible. A year later, I'll still be embarrassing myself in front of audiences by referring to a character or place by a name that no longer appears in the novel.

When you fix a name, you fix something very important. Best get it right first time, because the connection will be very hard to break.

4. Naming

(iii) DIFFERENTIATION

Variety in names is good, as variety is always good. With names, there's a special reason for differentiation—so that the reader doesn't get bogged down in keeping track of the characters.

In real life, names are often the same or similar. My next-door neighbours used to include father Richard, son Richard and even grandfather Richard. Add me as a fourth Richard, and how confusing is that?

But at least, in real life, there's plenty of time to get accustomed to such complications. Not so in a novel.

If you're absolutely committed to realism for the sake of it, then, okay, you won't care about making life hard for the reader. *Wuthering Heights*—which is very realistic in odd ways—has Cathy/Catherine as the daughter of Catherine/Cathy, not to mention a Linton (first name) who isn't a Linton (family name). I bet every single reader has struggled with the names in Emily Brontë's novel.

Creating names that ring true is essential in fantasy fiction, but samenesses and similarities are optional. Yes, people (and places) might have the same or similar names, but they also might not. I'll always choose the second option. Struggling with names seems to me an unproductive sort of labour to impose on the reader.

With fantasy fiction, there are often many names to lock on to at the start of a novel, and usually unfamiliar names we've never met in real life. Lately, I've been making a conscious principle of what I've always done unconsciously. All other things being equal, I'll try to start the name of each major character with a different letter of the alphabet.

I think that initial capital letter is important when reading. We register and remember it even if we haven't yet registered and remembered the (unfamiliar) name as a whole. At least, I know I do. If I get confused between characters' names when reading, it's most often between names that start with the same letter.

So that's my contribution to reader-friendly naming. I wish I could find equally slick principles for the rest of the writing business!

4. Naming

(iv) NAMES FOR INVENTED THINGS

Common nouns, which don't have a capital letter, name things with which we're already familiar—except in fantasy and SF. An otherworld (or future world) will typically contain wonderful new plants, animals and types of gadgetry. Such things will have names in their own world but not, of course, in ours.

The aim is to use invented common noun names in the way they'd be used in their own world, i.e., as if everyone was already familiar with their meaning. A heavy-handed block of explanation would distance us and make us feel like outsiders. As post-Tolkien readers, we want to imagine that we're living along with the characters, actually inside this otherworld (or future world).

When common noun names appear without explanation, they can have a special poetry of sound and association, reverberating with possible meanings. Creating evocative common noun names is as much a challenge as making up proper noun names.

In general, readers of fantasy and SF are prepared to enjoy the poetry of new names without demanding an instant description of what the name refers to. But this poetry works best when it's used sparingly, trickled though here and there. A novel that begins by bombarding the reader with a lot of meaningless names is a total turn-off.

Luckily, there are ways of introducing invented names that don't leave the reader completely in the dark. For example, 'mellis' could refer to just about anything, while 'rose' refers to a familiar plant in the real world. Put the two together, and you have a sense of strangeness that isn't blank obscurity. We know that a 'mellis-rose' doesn't exist in our world, but we also know the kind of thing it is. Praise be to hyphens!

Putting words side by side can also create hyphen-like effects. We don't know what kind of thing 'orinette' is, but we can make a good guess if we read about a market stall selling 'orinette and parsley'. It's not logical—in an otherworld, probably every herb ought to have a new name—but it works.

The trick is to give the reader enough to be going on with. Never a sentence like

> Walking along the street, Jorris passed valiboos, darkas, penories and sassipons.

Wha—? Uh? This is where we throw the book down in frustration!

A Valiboo

Instead, we need to be told about valiboos hurtling round corners on two wheels, darkas turned up against the rain, glossy-leaved penories and passers-by eating sassipons on sticks. We still don't know exactly what these things are, but we can wait to find out more.

And in the meanwhile, our imaginations can go to work. The context of surrounding words helps the poetry along by stimulating our associations in a particular direction.

4. Naming

(v) NEW LANGUAGES

New names have their problems, but what about whole new languages? Societies in an otherworld aren't going to speak English. So what does the author do about it?

Well, um, nothing. The author acts as though the problem doesn't exist and hopes the reader won't notice. Or to put it another way, the author takes on the role of translator and turns everything into English, except for a few words that have no English equivalents.

A few untranslatable words are enough to convey a sense of living inside this otherworld. Neither reader nor author really wants to go the whole hog.

However, there's a further problem when members of different societies in an otherworld encounter one another. If they're truly different, they ought to speak different languages—which means they won't understand one another. This is a problem the author can't translate away.

Just occasionally, the meeting of two languages might be an important part of the story. Ninety-nine per cent of the time, though, it's a pain in the butt. Either you slow down the overall narrative by taking a year off for plausible language-learning; or you slow down dialogue and events while the characters crawl through the business of communication through signs and guesswork.

It's a small speed-hump that derails everything. The consequences are liable to be enormous. Most fantasy writers choose to go around the speed-hump by setting up a convenient universal or common language in the first place.

This doesn't necessarily cut out different languages. Societies may speak both their own language and the universal language. The flavour of the non-universal languages can be suggested by just a few phrases thrown in here and there.

It's a plausible set-up when some overarching empire has existed in the past—as with Latin as the common language of the Roman Empire, or English as the common language of the Raj in India. But in most otherworlds, the universal language is more of a handy convention. It's a small improbability for the sake of a very large pay-off.

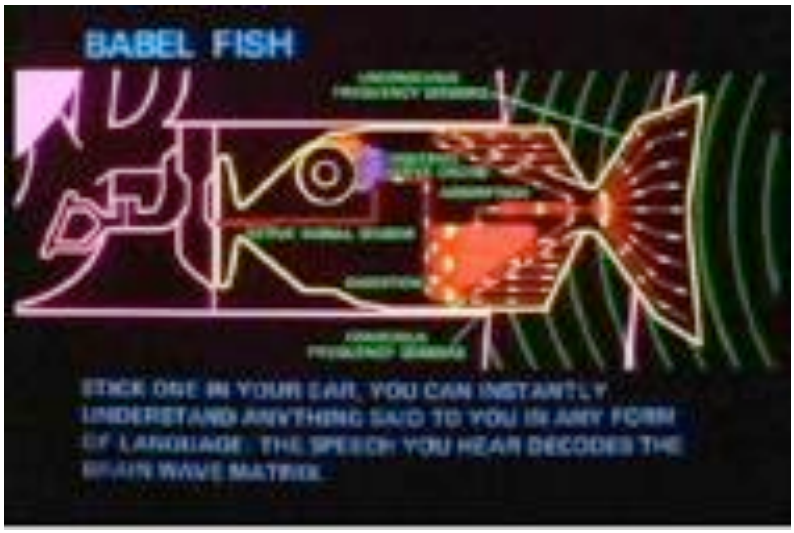
In SF, solutions are harder to come by. When members of one society (e.g. human) encounter an alien species, it's impossible to posit a shared language. Some solutions are:

—One society has learned to speak the language of another by eavesdropping on communication signals at long distance

—Or has developed a translation device by similar eavesdropping

—Or has developed a miraculous translation device that is valid for all languages.

Babel-fish, anyone?



GETTING PUBLISHED

Sub-sections & Pages

1. Understanding Publishers

(i) THE ARITHMETIC OF PUBLISHING

Publishers are not the enemy! When you're sending off an MS and getting knocked back time after time, it's natural to want to blame someone. You imagine a smug

clique conspiring to exclude you and turn a blind eye to your masterpiece. Can't they see the quality of your writing? Isn't it better than 90% of the rubbish they publish?

Well, your MS may not be a masterpiece, and what looks like published rubbish to you may have virtues that appeal to other people. But let's suppose your MS is the genuine article. You still need to understand how publishing works—and how the minds of publishers work.

First off: there are no smug fat cats in publishing. In particular, the publishers, editors and publishers' readers involved in deciding what to publish are hugely underpaid for their long hours of labour. Magazine editors are usually not paid at all. Anyone who takes a job in publishing does it out of love—because they certainly wouldn't do it for the money.

Publishers aren't perfect because the situation they work in isn't perfect. In fact, it's diabolical. Not because they are governed by some evil system—unless you want to call arithmetic an evil system. It's a simple matter of numbers: everyone wants to be a writer, not enough people want to be readers.

Or, revise that. Not enough people want to read widely. A few blockbusters per year could satisfy a large proportion of the reading public. And even readers who read widely are likely to borrow books from libraries and friends, or buy second-hand. (I hang my head, I'm guilty too.)

So, only a minute fraction of what gets written will ever get published. And of what gets published, only a quarter or less will make a clear profit. A tinier percentage again will make seriously big money.

Luckily, the unit cost for books is relatively low, and modern technology has been making it cheaper. Of course, the big money comes in when the initial production costs have been covered. As with CDs and DVDs, there's more and more profit in the sale price (after distribution and retailing) once you've reached a certain point.

Let's be thankful for the titles that make big money. They cross-subsidise all the hopefuls!

A hard-nosed cost-profit analysis would probably lead publishers to concentrate their efforts on a smaller number of titles per year. But, in spite of rumours to the contrary, publishing is not a particularly hard-nosed business. It is a business, so publishers can't bring out as many books as authors would like, or as many as they'd like to bring out themselves. They have to stay afloat.

But even now, when publishing houses have been absorbed into global conglomerates producing everything from cars to concrete, there's still a glamour and prestige surrounding the book industry that matters more than megabucks.

1. Understanding Publishers

(ii) THE NURTURING INSTINCT

The important thing to understand is that publishers are people, and they're driven by the same motives as anyone else. They want to publish successful books, be associated with successful authors—and nurture their own authors to success.

(Most publishers and editors for fiction are women, but the few male publishers and editors share equally in this particular nurturing instinct.)

The ultimate dream is to nurture to success an author you've discovered yourself. So why aren't more new authors discovered? The simple answer is time, time, time.

Every publisher would love to give full attention to every MS. Unfortunately, this would require a thousandfold increase in the number of publishers, and there's no money to pay them. In fact, there seems to be less and less money to maintain even the existing number; and in the meanwhile, publishers have more and more calls upon their time. Giving talks, appearing on panels, launching and promoting—such public profile activities are a large part of every publisher's job description nowadays.

Okay, here's my personal editing experience. Long ago, I helped out with the editing of a magazine called New Poetry, reading and evaluating piles upon piles of submitted poems and short prose pieces. Nowhere near as demanding as novels, yet my eyes and brain soon began to glaze over. It's really difficult to bring full attention and receptivity to one MS after another after another.

What's more, after a while you get used to the fact that most of the best stuff comes from name authors—or name poets, in my case. You still dream of making a new discovery, you still struggle to keep your mind open and ready for the unexpected. But it is a struggle, and I doubt anyone who hasn't done it can imagine how hard it is.

Most of all, you can't help getting used to the fact that you're far more likely to reject than accept. When I did my bit of poetry magazine editing, the odds were something like one acceptance to 300 rejections. Take out the name poets, and it would have been one to a thousand. And when you're expecting that you'll have to reject a submission even before you've started reading … well, you get the picture.

The more I know about book publishers, the more I believe they're far far better than anyone has a right to expect. In spite of the vast quantities of reading they do, in spite of the overwhelming probability of rejecting rather than accepting, they still manage to maintain an amazing degree of freshness and enthusiasm. Certainly far more than I could ever maintain. And I only did my bit of poetry magazine editing for three months!

In an ideal world, every MS would be read as an ordinary reader reads a book—with concentration, with enjoyment, with full engagement. But then an ordinary reader often has a whole week to spend on a single book! All publishers would love to have that luxury.

If you're an undiscovered talent, please don't turn against publishers who reject you. They do want to find you, they really do. But many factors outside of their control—outside of anyone's control—stand in the way. Allow for the factors and hang on to the truth: deep down, discovering new talent is their ultimate dream.

1. Understanding Publishers

(iii) LUCK & TIMING

You need to catch the right publisher in the right frame of mind. Nobody likes everything equally. What captures the attention of one publisher won't capture the attention of another; and what captures a publisher's attention in one mood or moment won't capture the same publisher's attention in another. It's all luck and timing.

Okay, your own research should steer you away from inappropriate publishing houses, and if you can track the tastes of individual publishers, all the better. But moods and moments are in the lap of the gods.

Another factor is the list, that is, the range of titles and authors currently contracted to a publishing house. A publisher may feel that the list is short on, say, female-oriented fantasy, so, whoee! there's a big opportunity for MSS in that area. On the other hand, the list may be already bulging with, say, YA adventure stories for boys, so a new submission in that area won't have much of a chance.

Ideally, every publisher is looking for quality, and nothing is ever absolutely ruled out. But when it's so difficult to capture attention anyway, it makes all the difference if a publisher is in a more rather than less receptive frame of mind.

There's a boom-and-bust tendency here, since many publishers will be looking to expand their lists in the same areas at the same time. Everyone sees a big upsurge of, say, paranormal romance, so everyone wants to jump on the same bandwaggon. Soon every publisher's list is chock-full of authors writing that particular kind of fiction. Then the door closes on new entrants—and it'll be a while before it opens again.

I've already said my piece on authors trying chase trends and the fact that no one outside the publishing industry is likely to move fast enough ("Writing to a Recipe" in the Good Writing Habits section). I still think you should write the best novel that's in you to write. But if what you've been writing happens to coincide with opening opportunities, then you're in luck!

1. Understanding Publishers

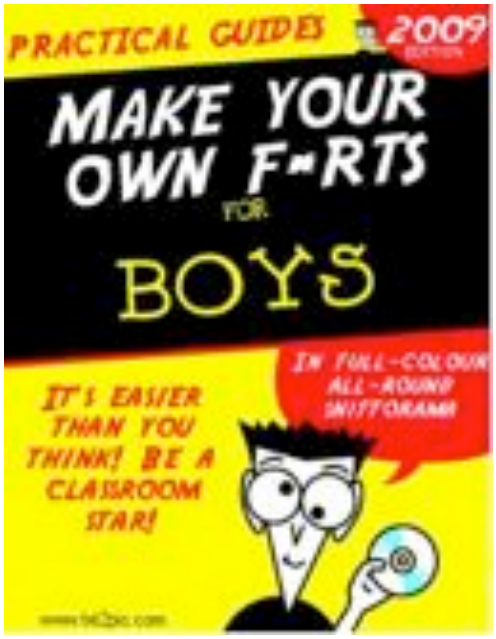
(iv) THE SOCIAL DIMENSION

It's true, publishers form a mini-society. They mostly know one another and mingle at the same events—so, naturally, they also compare themselves to one another. Time for some amateur anthropology!

Like everyone else, publishers want to succeed in the eyes of their peers and fellows. Think of the standing you'd achieve by being the publisher who discovered J.K. Rowling! Or, more practically, the standing you can achieve by being responsible for a whole string of successful titles. An ongoing ability to pick winners is probably more impressive than a lucky one-off super-success.

Sales figures matter, obviously, but a publisher who first creates a trend will be more admired than a publisher who cashes in later. Or, a publisher who uncovers a major new talent will gain more respect than a publisher who poaches an established name from another stable (though I bet that has its own satisfactions!). There are more considerations than sales figures alone.

Awards also matter. Some awards do affect sales figures: top awards like the Guardian Fiction Award will get your book into public libraries, for example. Awards for Children's and YA fiction like the Carnegie and the Costa Children's Book Award will almost guarantee that school and public libraries around the UK will order in copies. (One copy that loans out to many borrowers isn't as lucrative as a book that many people actually purchase, but you've got to start a reputation somewhere!) With lesser awards, it's debatable how much they influence the average book-buyer. But they matter to publishers, which means they have to matter to authors too.



Some successes carry more prestige than others. Let's face it, cookbooks and DIY/self-help books often top the best-seller charts, but they're don't have the glamour of fiction! And, within fiction, a 'quality' success rates more highly than an 'exploitation' success. For example, it's a known fact that bums-and-farts books for kids can sell well, sometimes spectacularly well, yet publishers often look askance at them.

It's partly a matter of personal reputation, but it's also a matter of how the publishing house wants to present itself. A shock/horror/porn book might sell very well as a one-off, but what would it do for the reputation of the publisher's list overall? Publishers can't afford to trade down the value of their 'marque' for the sake of a single smash hit.

1. Understanding Publishers

(v) WHO DOES WHAT

Who answers to whom in the publishing world is an incredibly complicated business. There are imprints that may or may not be almost independent from the publishing house to which they're attached. (The independent ones are like independent music labels, still depending on a major label for all the things they can't do themselves.) There are connections between UK publishers and overseas publishers that may or may not tie in with the name of the publishing hourse. And so on and so forth. The variations and intricacies are mind-boggling.

The decision-making process within publishing houses isn't quite so mind-boggling. The publisher, who used to be called the commissioning editor, makes the final decision, but the first person to read the MS is usually an in-house editor, or an out-of-house editor or reader. If a publisher likes the general look of your MS, it'll be passed on to someone else for a full report.

There's a great deal of outsourcing and freelancing in the publishing world. In the computer age, many of the jobs can be done from home and fitted in around family life. Most out-of-housers and freelancers have previously worked full-time in the industry and have developed links with one or more publishing house(s). Publisher's readers may have developed links in other ways.

One thing about full-time, in-house people is that they often change positions and employers. The poor author may become a very unhappy author if a particular nurturer at a particular publishing house moves off elsewhere. Naturally, the new person will want to make their own discoveries of talent, and may not feel so positive about someone else's. The fairy tales had it right—the wicked stepmother syndrome!

Okay, let's not get talking about disasters, though they do happen. Here's another snag that happens far more often—at the interface between the editorial team and the sales and marketing team. Sales and marketing is a very large—huge—part of modern publishing, and nowadays they too have a say in what gets published.

I take back what I said before; the publisher's decision is only final for the editorial team. There are still negotiations, persuasions and trade-offs to win endorsement from the sales and marketing team.

The rationale for involving sales and marketing is that they're viewed as the experts on what will sell. They're certainly the experts on what they can pitch to bookshop managers or owners or the head-offices of bookshop chains. A book has to click with the bookshop buyers before it ever gets the chance to click with the reading public.

So it's complicated even here. The author has to sell to the publisher, the publisher has to sell to sales and marketing, the reps from sales and marketing have to sell to the bookshops, and finally the bookshops sell to the reading public. At every stage, the book has to be talked up in a slightly different way.

1. Understanding Publishers

(vi) SHORT STORY OUTLETS

From time to time, the mainstream press brings out general anthologies, and a relatively unknown author has at least a chance to submit a story, even though name authors get first consideration. But, if you're thinking of submitting a single-author collection of your own stories to a mainstream publisher—forget it! Publishers are reluctant to bring out single-author collections even from writers with big reputations. It's a proven fact that such collections sell only half as many copies as a novel—so why would anyone take a risk on a newbie?

(An author with a big reputation has a different problem. Since so much ordering is done by computer, the author's next novel will be ordered into shops according to the sales of his or her last publication, i.e. half as many, if that last publication was a collection of short stories.)

The best publication opportunities for short stories are magazines, webzines and small-press anthologies. I'm talking only speculative fiction here, because it's all I know about. As regards these outlets, I suspect writers of short speculative fiction have it good compared to most other popular genres. The pay is low, but the outlets are many.

Some fully professional magazines have paid editors, but for most, it's voluntary labour done for love alone. Sometimes there's a single editor, sometimes a group of editors; often there's an assisting group of readers. ('Editor' here means commissioning editor, or what I've been calling the 'publisher' for a novel. The main difference is that these editors normally have to carry out all the other tasks too!)

Webzines often pay better than print magazines. For me, a story that appears for a limited time in cyberspace is more ephemeral than a volume you can hold in your hand. But I'm probably old-fashioned. A growing number of people do read stories online.

I don't have much experience of POD (print on demand) publication, but I think you'd want to know there's at least enough of a print run to get the zine into (specialist) bookshops and selling at conventions. I can't see how the collection will reach many readers otherwise.

Okay, whoa! reality check here. No small-press production will reach that many readers anyway. But it can still reach people who matter. There's a core of aficionados at the centre of the speculative fiction world who have an influence out of all proportion to their numbers.

Remember, also, that in this world the awards for short stories carry almost as much prestige as the awards for novels. Winning awards for short stories builds your

reputation and gives you another form of recommendation when you approach a publisher with a full-length MS.

1. Understanding Publishers

(vii) UNDERSTANDING SHORT STORY EDITORS

For editors of magazines, webzines and small-press anthologies, the key factor is once again time, time, time. The number of submissions still vastly outweighs the number of possible acceptances, and an editor working for love alone is likely to be also holding down a job to pay the rent. (Also, often, to pay some of the publishing costs.)

Nonetheless, you can expect someone to read your story eventually, even submitting out of the blue, without reputation or recommendation. For an unknown author, that's the first hurdle cleared.

Not that a magazine, webzine or small-press anthology can afford to be without name authors. Names are an essential selling point, and editors will often approach name authors to request or commission a story. (Which later becomes a problem if the story turns out to be low-grade, bottom-drawer stuff …)

However, a few names are enough, and it's not necessary for every author to be a selling point. There's still room for relative unknowns to fit in.

For most magazine, webzine and anthology editors, as for most book publishers, the prospect of discovering new talent is one of the main reasons for taking on the task. The same obstacles stand in the way too: the brain-numbing effect of reading MS after MS after MS, the difficulty of bringing full and fresh attention to every story. Catching an editor in the wrong mood at the wrong moment can nuke your chances.

There are other reasons for rejection that have nothing to do with you. Every magazine, webzine or anthology has its own special slant and preferences. Some small-press outlets exist to push the editors' vision of what SF, fantasy or horror ought to be. The wise author buys/downloads a copy and reads before submitting. Submission guidelines never paint the full picture.

Another factor is the tendency to favour a known circle of writers and acquaintances. Not name authors but known authors. The smaller the press, the more this is likely to happen. But don't complain too bitterly—these people are working for love, remember, not as paid professionals. The playing field may not be level, but at least you're on it, you're not excluded. You just have to play harder.

Finally, there are factors similar to those that shape a publisher's list in book publishing. Your story may be rejected because the magazine, webzine or anthology

already has a story on a similar theme; or because your story would tilt the overall balance too much towards magic realism or hard SF or whatever (the other side of eclecticism is a need for variety); or your story may be long at 6,000 words, when the magazine or anthology already has several long stories and is looking for shorter pieces. (For most webzines, 6,000 words will be too long in the first place.)

The moral is, don't take every rejection as a reflection on the quality of your writing. Luck plays a part. Hang in and wait for the luck to swing your way.

2. Submitting

(i) SOMEONE TO RECOMMEND YOU

A fiction MS mailed to a publisher out of the blue isn't likely to get read. Unless, of course, you happen to be a rock star, supermodel, Olympic gold medallist or TV personality. Someone with glamour and public profile can attract media attention and reviews, which are so hard to score nowadays. For everyone in a publishing house, that makes the job much easier—a publisher can't help but be interested. (I'm not bitching about particular celebrities-turned-authors here; fame wins you an attentive reading, but you still need to have written something worth reading.)

Which one will become a best-selling author?

Probably your only chance with an out-of-the-blue fiction submission is in Children's Fiction. But check the publisher's website for guidelines first; and take what they say with a grain of salt even then. Publishers may have good intentions that fall short in reality.

Those of us who aren't celebrities need an extra boost. Publishers and their readers can't deal with the deluge of all possible MSS, so they rely on other people to cull the field first. That is, they rely on recommendations.

For example, a literary agent 'recommends' an MS simply by sending it to a publisher. It's passed the first level of approval if an agent is willing to put her name to it. Of course, you need an agent to take you on in the first place—more on the next page.

A recommendation counts if it comes from someone the publisher trusts, in particular, a professional or ex-professional in the book business. Here are some possibilities—
(i) People who've worked in publishing, people who work freelance for publishing houses. (Sometimes they may do MS assessment.)
(ii) Established authors. (Sometimes they may run creative writing workshops.)
(iii) Reviewers. (Ordinarily, the last thing reviewers want is more books to read, but I mention them because that's how I got my lucky break.)
(iv) Bookshop professionals. (Mainly, if they're involved in book-promoting activities on a high level.)

Ideally, you'd like someone to submit the MS on your behalf, though a 'reference' or quote will be a boost too. But remember the size of what you're asking, how many hours of someone else's time. You may be sure that any reader will love your story and feel retrospectively happy to have spent time reading it; but they are more likely to be thinking ahead to the difficulty of handing out an all-too-possible knockback.

Three chapters and a synopsis is a more reasonable ask than a whole novel. And even then, it's a big ask.

Asking people out of the blue won't get you far. You need to network, attend conventions, go to workshops, join organisations, make contacts. (I offer this advice because I know it's true, not because I'm good at it myself.) Of course, it makes all the difference if you can do something for people before asking them to do something for you.

Established authors often feel an irrational impulse to help aspiring writers. 'Irrational', because it multiplies the number of competitors; nonetheless, most authors remember back to when they too were newbies in need of a boost. But don't expect authors to be interested in you if you're not interested in them. You show you're interested in them by reading their books—a lot of their books.

It helps if money is involved! If you've paid serious money to attend a workshop run by an industry professional or an author, then there's a tiny bit of obligation, as well as personal contact and a chance of awakening personal interest.

Another possibility is to submit an MS for assessment. It'll cost, but don't try to do it on the cheap. Someone who has worked in a publishing house and/or is currently freelancing for publishing houses really does have the power to open doors.

However, there are shonky operators who promise the world without the power to deliver. Anyone who advertises their services saying they can give you sure-fire access to publishers is almost certainly someone who can't. Those who have the

power don't make a show of it; they have a reputation to maintain, and can't afford to promise that they'll recommend every MS—or even most MSS—they look at. Check an assessor's background to see if they've worked for a publishing house in a relevant editorial position for a significant period of time - that's the ideal.

This all sounds very calculating, and it is—way too calculating. If you think of MS assessments or workshops as just a means to an end, you'll never achieve your end. If you give the impression you're only in it for the sake of advancement, you'll turn people off very quickly. Nobody likes to be used as a ladder. And most people in the industry can suss out a user at twenty paces—they've had plenty of experience.

Everyone needs to learn, and that's what MS assessments and workshops are for. Other consequences are an accidental bonus. Be hopeful, be enthusiastic and put yourself in places where luck may come your way. Never act as though you have a right to anything.

2. Submitting

(ii) AGENTS

Some people argue the pros and cons of having an agent. For a new or unpublished author, truly, there are only pros. An agent will get your MS read by a publisher, and read in a mood of positive expectation. The more respected your agent, the more positive the expectation. And that's only for starters.

A good professional agent makes it her business to keep tabs on what particular publishers are looking for at a particular time. When openings for a certain kind of fiction appear, she'll know about them first. All those worries about publishers' lists and publishers' personal preferences vanish when an agent takes care of them for you.

It costs, of course. But if 15% or so of an advance and royalties looks like a lot of money, believe me, you just don't know all the other expenses you'll be up for if you want your book to succeed. 15% is nothing.

There may be a pay-off if your agent drives a better deal on your contract. But, for a new author, it's not likely to be a whole lot better, on the advance rather than the rate of royalties. You need to reach best-sellerdom before hard-nosed deal-making becomes important. For a new author, the benefits are elsewhere.

In many areas of production and promotion, an agent knows where to push, where to give in, where to go for a compromise. An author has very little power vis à vis a publishing house, and an agent has only a few degrees more. But an agent knows what an author doesn't: the places where negotiation is possible.

For example: when I didn't have an agent for my first book from a mainstream publisher, I tried to change how often the accounts on my book would be made up.

Doh! I had good legal advice, but not good advice for the book trade. As if any publishing house would change its standard accounting system just for me! I had sense enough to give in, though I was two books further down the track before I had sense enough to get an agent.

So it's all pros in my opinion—and that's not even including the emotional benefits of having someone to hold your hand, speak wise words and talk you through your periods of self-doubt. An author's relationship with an agent isn't only functional. But—and it's a giant looming BUT—you still have to get that agent in the first place.

Everyone knows the problem. A publisher won't look at an MS if it doesn't come from an agent, an agent won't take on an author until they've been published. It's a vicious circle, or certainly a very unfriendly one. But there are ways of breaking into it.

As with publishers, so with agents—you need a recommendation. Which means, again, that you need to network, make contacts and put yourself in places where someone might discover you. All exactly the same. But maybe the level of recommendation you need for an agent is a little lower. At least there are more avenues on offer, and that has to be good for your chances.

2. Submitting

(iii) WHAT TO SUBMIT?

Three chapters and a synopsis is the industry catchcry. Since I often write very short chapters, I think in terms of about 30 pages, never more than 40. The exception is shorter fiction for younger readers, where you should submit the full MS.

If you're an unpublished author, then you'll have written the book through to the end—you should've written the book through to the end. It probably does no harm to submit the full MS, if you want. But you still need to submit a synopsis that lays out the plot following on from the first two or three chapters.

Writing a synopsis is a pain. So much richness of characters and world and story distilled down to a mere 2-3 pages! I don't know any author who enjoys it. I'd sooner have teeth pulled. But it has to be done—and done well.

Think how hard it is to take in a potted plot in, say, a film review. Publishers are better at it than most of us, but you should aim to be as publisher-friendly as possible. Don't be dry, don't be stodgy and, above all, don't try to squeeze everything in.

Stick to the best and most important elements of your story. No one's going to care if a few sub-stories don't get a mention. Being clear matters; being comprehensive doesn't. Try to communicate a strong overall storyline, one event leading to the next, with pacy language in short paragraphs.

Never worry about giving away endings or big revelations. You need to show what you've got to offer. People in the publishing industry don't quite read like ordinary readers anyway.

I suggest trying out your synopsis on everyone you can rope in. What parts sound interesting? How could it be made more interesting? It may be a chore, but you need to devote yourself to it like the love of your life.

Then there's the pitch in your cover letter. Keep it enthusiastic and hopeful, don't try to say too much and don't tell a publisher their own business. Think of it as a blurb for your book's back cover.

The main thing a publisher wants to know is what kind of a book this is, where it fits in. The quickest way to signal this is by pointing to other stories: it has a similar appeal to such-and-such, the setting is a cross between this and that. You might believe your writing's unique, but save that for later. Of course, the similarities you'll find are only to successful stories!

A current hot success is the best of tie-ins. When a reviewer sent my first mainstream book to a publisher, he zoomed in on the fact that the relationship between the two lead characters is similar to the relationship between Mulder and Scully—and this at the very moment when The X-Files was turning into the hottest show on TV. I'd never noticed the similarity, though it's real enough. But what a hook!

The personal touch helps too. Whether you're submitting to a publisher, an agent or someone who might just recommend you to publisher or agent, you should never give the impression that they're just one stop on a list of possibilities. Why this publishing house? Why this agent? Find out something about them and, without obvious flattery, work it into your cover letter.

2. Submitting

(iv) FORMAT & PRESENTATION

When most MSS are going to be rejected and a publisher has so many many MSS to consider, the last thing you want to do is supply easy excuses for rejection. It's an insult to ask a publisher to spend time reading your chapters if you can't be bothered to spend time eliminating typos, spelling mistakes and sloppy bits of grammar.

Okay, you might have the greatest imagination and tell the greatest story in the world, but if your opening pages are dotted with small errors, nobody's ever going to discover your true genius. Such errors are superficial and readily fixed—but you've given a publisher reason to lose confidence in you. With a hundred other MSS waiting to be read, a tiny loss of confidence is enough to get your MS tossed aside after the first page or two.

When you format your pages, the aim is ease of reading. Double space, generous margins, single side of the sheet. Use a standard serif font such as Times, Times New Roman, New York or Palatino—and never less than 12 point.

I justify left and right, though justified left and ragged right is equally acceptable. A new paragraph should be indented without dropping a line, as in a printed book.

I used to find and print an attractive colour image to go at the front of my submitted MS. I have no idea if it worked, but I reckon a small point-of-difference can't hurt. The aim is to attract attention without being showy or appearing unprofessional.

The content of your opening pages also needs to attract attention. A dramatic opening that catches a reader's interest will catch a publisher's interest too. Not necessarily violent action, though; a publisher will be looking for a fluent style, a smooth unfolding, perhaps a distinctive voice. It's not true that publishers judge a book on the first half-page—but it helps for an unpublished author to think that way.

If your MS comes back rejected, don't keep sending out the same copy. A MS that's no longer in mint condition sends a message that it's already been read and rejected. That's a message you really want to keep to yourself.

Side-note. Some people worry that their ideas, if not their actual words, might get stolen and end up in someone else's book. I'm not saying that never happens, but when it's so difficult to have a MS accepted in any case, it's not worth being paranoid about. If your MS comes back rejected, it's a 99.99% probability that the publisher or agent or reader just wasn't overwhelmed by your ideas.

2. Submitting

(v) SUBMITTING SHORT STORIES

When submitting a short story to a magazine, webzine or small-press anthology, you send in the whole story. More and more short story outlets accept or insist on submission by email, which makes life a whole lot easier for the author—especially if you're submitting overseas.

The same principles apply as with full-length MSS: eliminate small errors, have a strong opening and follow the required format. In fact, short story outlets are much more precise about formatting and you need to read and obey their submission guidelines. Many outlets have their own special rules.

If the guidelines refer to standard formatting, that means Courier 12 point, double-spaced, justified left but *always* ragged right. Courier makes a page look as though it's been typed on a typewriter. I hate it, but I do what I'm told.

Also, you show italics in your text by underlining. It's usual to have a header that contains the author's name, story title and page number. Your first page should give your full contact address and the word count at the top.

For more information, check out: www.shunn.net/format/story.htm. That's an American site for American standard formatting, but it's much the same everywhere.

In your cover letter, you don't need to describe your story, except maybe a word or two on the kind of story it is. Do list any previous publication successes, awards, whatever. Success breeds success. I've recently had a story picked up by the Tor anthology, *Year's Best Fantasy #9*—my first top-level American success. You can bet that's going into every cover letter from now on!

Above all, never sound negative or defensive. I've seen cover letters that say something like, 'This story has been rejected twenty-one times before, so here's your chance to reject it too.' No guesses what happened! Quirkiness goes down well with some small-press editors, but not that kind of quirkiness.

It's good to match up your story with the preferences of a particular editor/editorial team. Buy a copy of the zine, or at least read through all the material on their website (which may include sample stories of blurbs/synopses of stories).

I search for speculative fiction outlets at www.ralan.com. Wonderfully comprehensive and constantly updated. Another site is www.duotrope.com/, which lines up particular market areas according to your kind of story.

Also can be useful: http://sfscope.com/newsnotes/market-reports/
http://community.livejournal.com/specficmarkets/

While I'm on site addresses: there's a good list of international awards at http://dpsinfo.com/awardweb/.

3. Contracts, Production, Promotion

(i) CONTRACTS & ROYALTIES

So you finally land that contract! Pop the champers! But perhaps you've heard horror stories about shonky contracts? Don't worry, no reputable publisher will try to do you over. As with any contract, though, you should go into it with your eyes open.

It's a contract!

The traditional percentage for royalties is 10% of RRP (recommended retail price). That's good: publishing houses could easily drive it lower, given the competition among aspiring authors. In America, they do. In the UK, authors benefit from tradition.

You won't change the percentage as such, even if it's lower than 10%. But you can try for a clause specifying a higher percentage if sales reach a certain figure well above the breakeven point.

Advances on royalties are paid to you usually in three portions: on signature of contract, on delivery of finalised draft and on publication. They're money in your pocket, but that's not why they matter.

A small advance is easier to 'earn out', which makes you look good with your publisher. But a big advance guarantees that your publisher will make an effort to push your book—naturally, they'll want to recoup that initial outlay. With so many books coming out all the time, any extra bit of push is invaluable.

A truly gi-normous advance becomes a selling point in itself, attracting media and retail interest. Ah, dreams! I read about such advances sometimes in the newspapers …

As for royalty statements: I know a great many professional writers, and not a single one can interpret their royalty statements. Some swear they're on the brink of a dazzling revelation—but even ex-accountants never seem to achieve full understanding. The ultimate complication is when books are sold Sale or Return, which means that, after a period of months, a bookshop can return unsold copies and claim a refund. The publishing house has to hold back a part of the money from sales to cover the cost of refunds, and this part is also held back from an author's royalties. It's a mystery tangled in a perplexity submerged in a deep obscurity …

Publishing houses aren't very fond of the Sale or Return system, because they're giving refunds on thumbed-through copies that often can't be sent out again for sale. New authors should probably approve, though, because the system gives an unknown more chance of making it onto the shelves. If bookshops had to sure of selling all their stock, they'd surely incline to play it safe and stick with established names.

3. Contracts, Production, Promotion

(ii) EXTRA EARNINGS

There's a quiet and non-glamorous way in which UK authors make more money—through PLR (Public Lending Rights). For every book borrowed from a public library, the government pays 6p to the author. Small … but it mounts up over the years when your book is held in a large number of libraries. It's a useful little earner—and it keeps on earning.

The glamorous ways of making more money are sales overseas and sales of movie rights. A contract normally gives a publishing house 1 to 2 years after publication to secure an overseas sale. However, they aren't always as profitable as you might think from the size of the markets: in the US, because of lower royalty rates; in all countries, because royalties are split between you and your original publisher. But they raise your prestige and rebound on sales in the UK.

Movie sales are fantastic, if they happen. I've never heard of any regular routes for making them happen. Who knows why producers or directors or name actors become interested in a particular book as a movie prospect? I have a film director interested in making a movie version of *Worldshaker*—which happened by sheer fluke and personal contact. I suspect that's the way it usually happens.

3. Contracts, Production, Promotion

(iii) EDITS

I talked about revising in the light of an editor's feedback before. Now for the practicalities.

Post-contract, there are two main stages: a structural edit that deals with significant changes to story and characters and such; and a copy edit or line edit that deals with small intra-paragraph problems of expression, clarity, etc. Last of all comes the proof-reading, to correct typos and any errors that have crept through the copy edit—but this is not a time to be having second thoughts about what you want to say or how you want to say it!

You normally work with an editor who is not your publisher, or two editors for the two stages. Your editor(s) may be in house or out of house. Copy editing especially is often outsourced.

Publishing houses have their own house styles, and you have to respect that. Don't be stubborn about your own way of doing things unless it makes a real difference for this book as against any other book.

3. Contracts, Production, Promotion

(iv) THE COVER

As I said when talking about titles, covers are publisher's business. Or more accurately, the business of the whole publishing house, involving the design people and the sales and marketing people.

You'll be asked for your opinion and asked to write a blurb. Don't be deluded by a sense of power! Be constructive and creative; come up with good ideas, original angles, effective phrasings, and your publisher will seize on them. But what you're supplying is no more than raw material. You don't make the decisions on the finished product.

Of course, you can say No and hope you'll be listened to. But grumbling 'I don't like this' and 'I don't like that' conveys a bad impression. If there's something you truly don't like, try to come up with better suggestions and positive alternatives.

As for the cover art, you have even less influence there. And remember that what matters is a striking image to make the book stand out on the shelves and seduce the casual browser into taking a peek inside. It doesn't matter if the cover conveys the central features of your story; it doesn't matter if it correctly depicts every detail of a particular scene. So what if there ought to be a river in the background or an extra

combatant with a club? The only correspondence to be considered is whether it reflects the feel of the story overall.

A huge amount of work goes into covers. I've heard it said that a book's cover determines 50% of its sales—how scary is that? You can see why a publishing house tries to team a sellable cover with sellable content. A cover is no mere incidental extra tagged on to the story within.

I've been incredibly lucky with the covers for *Worldshaker.* The Australian one is by Anthony Lucas (director of the Oscar and BAFTA shortlisted movie, *Jasper Morello*: the US one has beautiful greeny-bronze colours; and the UK one is the best of all, because it's by my all-time favourite spec fic artist, Ian Miller, and he's done an *amazing* job!! Three times lucky is way over the odds!

Side-by-side – Australian, American, British.

3. Contracts, Production, Promotion

(v) HOW SALES WORK

Publishing houses in the US still launch a book in hardback first, which is how it used to work in the UK. Nowadays it's very rare, except for a few very big and established names. However, there's a new way of doing it, which is to bring out a trade paperback first (i.e. the larger size of paperback). The aim is to have a double bite at the cherry. With trade first and standard to follow, there's more time to get

momentum going with reviews and word-of-mouth. And when one format has had its time on the bookshop shelves, another appears to maintain the presence.

A different means to the same end is the advance short run of reading copies, using a short run method of printing. These will go out to reviewers and/or bookshops and/or general movers and shakers within the book industry. With luck, reviews will be appearing soon after the selling copies hit the shops, instead of several months later.

The word 'trade' has a further meaning for children's and YA fiction, where titles are marketed either as trade or as education. Whereas trade sales are made through bookshops in the ordinary way, education sales are made through schools, organised by school-visiting reps. For some reason no one can explain, titles are almost never marketed as both trade and education. The education market has its own requirements; it pays, but it doesn't do much for an author's general profile.

Bookshop sales work in different ways depending on the type of shop. At one extreme are the 'independents', who make their own decisions and order in whatever they think they can sell. (And don't we love 'em!) At the other extreme are the newsagencies, that have their books supplied by a supplier like stationery or greeting cards.

The chain stores such Smiths, Waterstones and Easons in Ireland are in the middle of the spectrum. To the extent that they're franchises and not run directly from head office, they can make independent decisions on what to order in. However, head office buys in many titles at a discount for volume, and stores are expected to take and sell copies.

When the books arrive, they're categorised according to the shop's shelves: Fantasy/SF, Children's/YA, etc. Bookshops will almost never put a title in two separate places, which can be a problem for a book that crosses between genres.

What about end-of-row positioning, dump bins, special spots? Let's not get carried away! A publishing house has to offer incentives to bookshops and/or head office to gain these spots. With company stores, there's payment involved … in fact, they require payment even for putting up posters of a book.

(If this sounds topsy-turvy, it's how supermarkets work too. Food makers have to pay for a prominent space on the shelves for their products.)

Lastly, the issue of shelf-time. Groan! The old expectation that a book would stay on display for 6 months is highly optimistic nowadays. It's sell fast or perish! When you think how long we take getting around to buying a book, how long we take reading it, how long before we recommend it to friends—well, a movie that's on the screens for a week has more chance of building momentum by word-of-mouth.

3. Contracts, Production, Promotion

(vi) ADVERTISING BOOKS

Wouldn't we all love to have our books featured in TV commercials, taking up full newspaper pages, plastered across hoardings and the sides of buses? That's what jumps into our minds when we think of advertising. But it's not going to happen.

In the first place, the book business isn't that profitable. Only the best of best-sellers could recoup the cost.

In the second place, you'd be advertising to a total population, when only a small proportion will actually buy books—and an even smaller proportion will buy books of a particular genre such as fantasy.

Side-note. The kind of people who buy books probably aren't the kind to be influenced by heavy-handed advertising anyway. You'd get their backs up if you simply kept battering them with slogans.

But even if money were no object, general advertising wouldn't work very well. Take yourself as a sample case: what makes you buy a book? Just out of curiosity, I might buy a book once if I saw the title splashed across the media—but once would be the limit. Books aren't like margarine.

Margarine is something that everyone has to buy and keep on buying, with only a few brands to choose from. So, the adverts try to lodge a particular brand and its benefits in our brains. A book is more like a luxury item—a special sort of luxury item that also makes demands on us. That is, it's going to use up many, many hours of our time, it requires a commitment. Would you buy a book just on the off chance of enjoying it? Most of us need some strong reason to believe that we will.

General advertising could only be justified with an established best-selling author, when the adverts aren't persuading people to try the book, so much as notifying them that his/her latest is now out in the shops.

As for new authors, no one's really sure what will sell, so publishing houses bring out far more titles than they can support with promotional campaigns. It's been called spaghetti theory: throw a plate of spaghetti against a wall and see what sticks. The promotion will come in later for the few authors who manage to stick.

3. Contracts, Production, Promotion

(vii) PUBLICISTS & JOURNALISTS

The person who works to publicise your book is your in-house publicist. Behind the scenes, your publicist will create and send out flyers, send out review copies, phone and re-phone newspapers, magazines and radio stations. Much of the procedure is standardised, working from a list; but remember that 'your' publicist is a great many other authors' publicist too. It's a low-ranking job that ought to rate more highly.

Your publicist will ask you to supply material and make yourself available for interviews. No reclusive authors nowadays! You should aim to be not only non-reclusive, but out there and involved.

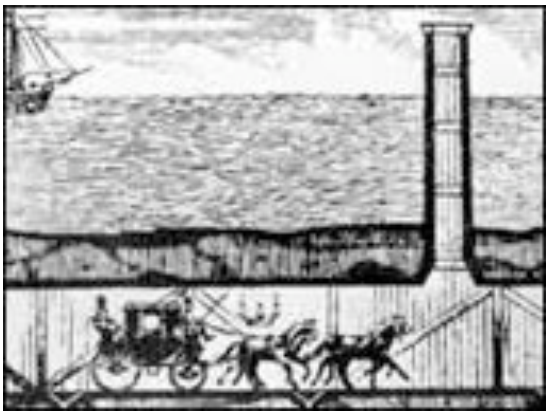
The first step is to put yourself in the shoes of a journalist. Whether in print or on radio (forget TV!), a journalist wants a story to catch the audience's attention. Human interest counts, real-world connection counts, but your book for its own sake doesn't. You need to give the journalist what s/he wants, while selling your book on the side.

It's hard for fantasy writers who work out of their imaginations. Real-world connections are easy if you've written a realistic novel that includes a character with an eating disorder or a background of drug gangs in Brighton. Journalists are used to dealing with such angles; they're not used to dealing with portals or floating cities or new versions of magic.

With the Ferren books, I soon learned that my best hook was angelology. Not the special future developments in my trilogy, but the traditional lore concerning the orders of angels and the levels of Heaven. Journalists were more interested in the research behind the books than the books themselves. (It's true, the research was fascinating, the only time I've really loved researching.)

With the *Wolf Kingdom* quartet of fantasies for children, what came to the fore was the tale of my twenty-five years of writer's block. It wasn't a new story, but suddenly it was the flavour du jour.

With *Worldshaker*, who knows? My guess is that the alternative history background to the novel may be more of a hook than the novel itself. Namely, the historical fact that, when Napoleon had defeated all the powers of Europe except for England, an engineer called Mathieu-Favier approached him with a well-developed scheme for digging a tunnel under the English Channel. Napoleon gave the scheme serious consideration, but decided against it.



Contemporary diagram of Mathieu-Favier's tunnel

In the *Worldshaker* world, Napoleon decided for it, leading to a totally different state of reality a century and a half later. The tunnel is my point of divergence, or POD in alternate history jargon. It's not central to the novel itself, but it may be what works for journalists.

Journalists are madly busy people. Any material you supply for them to use will be much appreciated. Just don't expect them to have read the book! Some will, and that's a wonderful bonus. But be prepared to enthuse and entertain regardless.

3. Contracts, Production, Promotion

(vii) SELF-PROMOTION

For reviews and interviews, you can probably give most help to your publicist in your own area. Make contact with local newspapers and radio stations: a local-writer-makes-good story always has appeal. But that's only your first tiny step.

I admit I'm still a learner in the art of self-promotion. After fifteen books, a very slow learner you could say! But I've been learning from the masters—such as Ian Irvine in Australia, J.A. Konrath in the US. I'll speak from their greater experience as well as my own.

The first thing to understand is that no form of self-promotion ever repays your time and money with immediate sales. But you have to begin somewhere if you want to generate good word-of-mouth. A single reader who loves your book can start the ball rolling. And the best person to begin with is an influencer.

Librarians are key influencers. Librarians all talk to one another and recommend books to one another in an amazing network. An author can call round on libraries, talk to librarians, give away posters and offer to do talks. Start local and spread out.

For YA and children's fiction, school visits are a great means of promotion—and you can get paid too! Offer workshops and talks, become an entertainer and develop teaching skills. It's best if you can do it through one of the booking agencies that arrange school visits.

For school libraries and public libraries, you can also do a mail-out. But librarians (bless 'em!) aren't the type of people to be swayed by a hard sell. A personal letter about your book will count for much more than glossy advertising bumf.

Bookshops are also key influencers. If bookshop staff recommend your book to potential customers, that's a huge plus. Call round on bookshops and offer to sign copies of books. Independent bookshops are the most approachable -- as well as the most influential! In some cases, they'll be happy to put up posters for you.

In the world of fantasy and SF, conventions are an obvious way to make yourself known. Convention-going aficionados have an influence way beyond their numbers. And the spec fic community does great conventions! Appear on panels, do readings and be generally part of the scene. Don't push-push-push your book; go to enjoy yourself and the promotion will come naturally.

All of the above are methods for creating interest, adding a face and personality to your book. If possible, arrange for on-the-spot sales when you do a talk. If it's not possible, always hand out a bookmark or a 'postcard' or something to keep the title of your book in people's minds afterwards.

Book launches generate on-the-spot sales, but they are expensive. Launches can be done at conventions, at libraries, even at schools. A bookshop launch wouldn't be my first option—you need plenty of extended family and friends to be sure of a good turn-up.

Bookshop signings are an even bigger risk, when the author sits behind a table and waits for the public to come forward with copies in their hands. It can be a very long wait and a very humbling experience! In my view, formal bookshop signings are for big-name authors only.

You should always talk over all ideas for self-promotion with your publicist. Firstly, because she may be able to help organise events for you. Secondly, because you don't want your plans to duplicate or clash with hers. And thirdly, because it's good to be

seen working at self-promotion. The more pro-active you are, the more your publicist and publisher will come to the party.

Not financially, though. Every book has a set promotional budget, and what gets spent in one way won't get spent in another. (Perhaps bookmarks but not launch or posters; perhaps posters but not launch or bookmarks.) You need to put your own dough on the line, maybe a large part of your advance. Think of it as an investment in yourself.

3. Contracts, Production, Promotion

(ix) SOMETHING TO GIVE AWAY

You should always have something to give away. One thing you're already giving away is yourself and your time. You may not have earned megabucks or sold movie rights, but you still have the aura of a published author. Most people feel a little flattered that a published author will give up time for a chat with them.

But you need more, you need freebies. Bookmarks and postcards are good, with a cover image on the front, a blurb on the back. There's less chance they'll get thrown away if you personally sign them first. In fact, sign everything! (J.A. Konrath's dictum)

The best freebies are special and memorable. Bookmarks were once special, but now, alas, they're common as dirt. I found that badges worked well for my *Wolf Kingdom* books (children's fantasies) and I believe they'll work well for *Worldshaker* too (YA/crossover fantasy). I've also used t-shirts printed with the book cover. Other authors give away inscribed pens and drinks coasters.

The beauty of badges and t-shirts is that anyone who wears them will be advertising your book to other people too.

Whatever your angle, you need to do your budgeting. Bulk orders keep costs down. I can get badges done for 50 cents each, but t-shirts at $10 are a different proposition. Still, you wouldn't want to keep costs down by cutting corners. Freebies that look cheap send the wrong message. This applies to everything you give away, including posters.

At the same time, you don't want to put all your eggs in one basket. Nobody can predict which forms of promotion will or won't work. You need to run with a few possibilities, and see what has the best effect.

Above all, be original. If all the talk about selling your book makes your heart sink (mine used to!), here at least is something you're good at. As an author, you're a

creative person; if you write speculative fiction, you've got imagination. Use your special advantages to invent a new angle first.

For *The Vicar of Morbing Vyle*, fifteen years ago, I devised quizzes with copies of the book as prizes, and persuaded student newspapers to run them for free. Quirky gothic quizzes targeting my cult audience. For *Worldshaker* (out this May) I think I've got a great new idea … only I'm keeping it under wraps until I've done it first!

3. Contracts, Production, Promotion

(x) PROMOTING ON THE WEB

I'm not a good guide on web promotion, because I seem to be forever playing catch-up to the latest developments. A blog, many blogs, Facebook, a video on YouTube—here too, nobody can predict what will or won't work. But if you capture the attention of someone who already has the attention of other people …

One thing you must put up is an author's website, or, if you prefer, individual websites for individual books. There are many people—librarians for starters—who will want to look up more information about you. Your website URL should go on every card, poster and freebie you hand out, as well as inside your book(s).

If you aim to build up a fan base—as you should—you also need to give an email address. I still manage to answer all emails personally, though it's starting to take up a huge slice of my time.

A website should do much more than advertise your books; it should create a sense of a special relationship with fans. Giveaways and quizzes and free extra material all help.

Extra material is easy for a fantasy writer. You can post up pages about other parts of your world, all the bits and pieces you never managed to fit into your novel. Extra background, extra stories—spreading a world out further and further is a natural tendency for fantasy writers anyway.

For *Worldshaker*, I plan to expand on the history of how juggernauts came to be built a century and a half ago. And who knows, there could be a whole novel in it eventually? If there is, how cool to give fans a role in shaping it …

I nearly forgot to mention my biggest freebie—you're reading it now! When I began these writing tips, I thought of them as something to 'give away' on my author's website. Now they've grown so big, I've had to set up a separate website, and I've spent as many hours writing them as writing a short novel. Still, they started out as a form of promotion, even if they somehow changed along the way into a labour of love!

Time to give J.A. Konrath's web address.
http://www.jakonrath.com/writers.htm
and download The Newbie's Guide to Publishing

His thoughts on publishing, and especially self-promotion, are invaluable.

4. The Writing Life

(i) THE LONG HAUL

Ah, the writing life! Some people seem to hanker for the lifestyle more than they have anything to actually write. If you're seduced by images of a fashionable, languorous, sun-drenched, cocktail-sipping lifestyle, jump off now! If you're desperate to write, read on …

After the publication of her first novel, Jodi's life changed in many ways …

You have to be in it for the long haul. For intending writers, I suggest a Five Year Plan—minimum! You can't reckon on your first book being accepted by a publisher. No matter how good it is, the timing may be against you. Plan several projects and be

ready to write them; don't pin all your hopes on a single MS. And don't worry: those other MSS may still have their day in the sun later.

Even apart from writing, you'll need several years to make contacts, perhaps score some short story hits—whatever it takes to snare that all-important recommendation. (See the "Getting a Recommendation" page) Start working on the pathways to success even as you start writing the novel(s) you want to succeed.

When you have an MS accepted, you shift from the Five Year Plan to the Unlimited Lifetime Plan. There are some lucky authors whose first book is a mega-success, but it's rare. A writing career is built on a run of books each adding a little more success on top of the one before. Picture waves creeping steadily up a beach! You need to have more than one good book in you.

The reputation you build is a reputation of increasing sales, of course, but also a reputation as a 'professional'. You want to become known as an author with whom publishers can work, an author who puts in the hard yards, an author who delivers on promises. That way, you'll still be in demand even if one of your waves falls back a little!

4. The Writing Life

(ii) BUILDING A BRAND

I wish I didn't have to write this page. Here's one area where I'd prefer to turn a blind eye to reality. Still, I have to tell it like it is.

The fact is that the simplest way to build increasing sales is to build a brand. Readers like to know, when they pick up a book by a particular author, that they'll get the same sort of story they've enjoyed from this author before. They're liable to be confused by an author (like me) who switches between genres and ages.

I was talking to a primary school librarian the other day about my children's fantasy books, the *Wolf Kingdom* quartet, and she said, 'No, I didn't buy those books for the library—I thought you were a YA author.' And when even a librarian can't keep track …

It follows that publishers like an author to capitalize on any success by writing more of the same. They're not eager for an author to hop sideways into a second genre. From a promotional point of view, it's a whole new commitment of time and effort, starting from scratch again. What's more, they probably have authors whose names they're already trying to promote in that genre.

From an author's point of view—well, my point of view—it's not always so easy to write more of the same. The batteries may need time to re-charge; meanwhile, the imagination is running hot in some other area. Still, I guess I've come to a stage in my career where I'm prepared to work at some brand-building.

The *Worldshaker* type of book is my most natural groove anyway: steampunk-Victoriana-alternative history fantasy. If the Richard Harland name has to belong to a particular sub-genre, then that's the one.

ANTHONY LUCAS' VISION OF THE ENGINE-ROOM DEPTHS OF THE JUGGERNAUT

Readership age is another aspect of brand-building. You have more chance of getting picked up as a writer of children's fiction; you used to have more chance of getting picked up as a writer of YA fiction (though not for YA fantasy, not any more). Once you're tied to a particular age bracket, however, it's very difficult to break away. Even when a YA author does get an adult novel published, it'll normally be marketed as YA.

A pseudonym is the answer, for the purpose of not confusing readers and not carrying through a potential drop in sales. Just don't expect your publisher to jump at the idea! There's still a whole new promotional commitment required. Your publisher would always prefer you to devote your time to the kind of story where you've already made a name.

4. The Writing Life

(iii) HOW NOT TO ENJOY THE WRITING LIFE

Are writers ever satisfied? The worst thing you can do is compare yourself all the time to other writers. Someone somewhere is doing better than you? Well, what did you expect? Not everyone can take out the gold medal, and anyway this is a very very long race. Envy is the mind-eater!

It's sad when authors who have made big sales whinge about not winning awards, or when authors who have won awards whinge about not making big sales. Anyone whose books are published is already a huge winner.

J.K. Rowling cheers up after selling her 1,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000th book

Spectacular early success must feel wonderful—on the other hand, anything less later must feel like a failure. What a huge burden to write under, always striving to live up to early spectacular success. The psychological pressure seems to have got to J.K. Rowling round about the fifth book, though thankfully she struggled through it.

As for later success—from what I see, it never becomes an easy ride, no matter how high you go. (I'm talking other authors here, since I'm still waiting to achieve mega-sales myself!) There may come a time when everyone keeps buying your books, but there never comes a time when everyone loves and acclaims them. On the contrary, people can become quite vicious if they decide your reputation is overblown.

Even Stephen King gets bad reviews from reviewers who think his latest book isn't as good as it should be. In fact, he probably gets more bad reviews than a first-novel newcomer whom nobody envies.

Of course, he does at least get reviews, and a bad review is better than no review, as all authors constantly remind themselves. But a bad review still hurts. Even for a super-successful author, it hurts. Yet almost no authors can hold back from reading them.

We judge ourselves in other people's eyes, we can't help it. I find it hard to believe anyone who says they're writing a novel purely for themselves, with no wish for publication. I definitely disbelieve any published author who claims not to care about praise and fame. But the external public satisfactions can be elusive.

4. The Writing Life

(iv) THE HAPPY WRITER

What other satisfactions are there? For me, where I am in my writing career, there are two sure and solid satisfactions.

One is the response of ordinary readers. Not reviewers, but fans who send emails or who come up to me after talks and public appearances. When someone says, 'Couldn't put that book down!' or 'Are you going to write a sequel?' I know I've touched a chord in someone's imagination. It's such a good feeling! And when younger readers say it—since half of my novels are YA or children's—I know there's no intention to flatter. Kids don't bullshit!

The other satisfaction is in the writing itself, especially the stage of planning and the stage of the 'downhill glide'. Planning is sheer, freewheeling, solo creativity. I've been going on about constraints—what readers expect and publishers expect—and yes, a writer needs to be aware of the constraints and take them on board sooner rather than later. But still, we have so much freedom compared to creators in any other medium.

Movies and TV shows earn big money, but they also cost big money to produce. Scriptwriters and directors are never allowed the freedom we take for granted. It's because the production costs for a book are a fraction of the costs for a movie or TV show that publishers can take risks—and, in spite of all the constraints, they do. It's no wonder that the most original new ideas in fantasy and SF appear in books before making their way through to other media.

The 'downhill glide' is when I've done all the hard work, set everything up right, and the story takes over and writes itself. It happens when I'm coming towards the climax and it's like being carried along on a toboggan. If I'd ever learned to surf, I'd probably compare it to riding a wave. Exhilarating! A natural high! (The only problem is, I can hardly get to sleep nights …)

So here I am, the happy writer … the mostly happy writer. I aim to make the best of the highs and avoid stressing over the lows. I've never worked so hard in my life, but since I'm doing what I always dreamed of doing, maybe I shouldn't call it work.

I guess this is the end of the trip. Thanks for staying with me, and I hope some of what I've said will be helpful.

Here's wishing you happy writing and good fortune! May your dream come true too!

All the best!
Richard