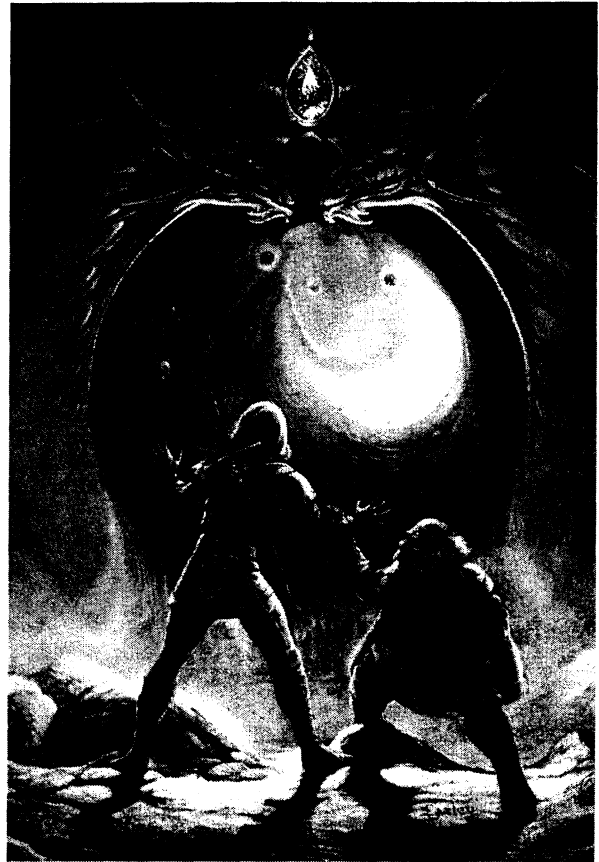


The Pen and the Sword: How to Write Fantasy

Young adults often enjoy writing their own fantasy fiction. Today's YA librarians may want to create programming activities that focus on that particular type of creative writing. Many professional authors have given valuable advice on the best ways to write fantasy fiction. What follows is a sampling of their suggestions.

Orson Scott Card, in his book *How to write science fiction and fantasy*, indicates that a first step is to understand the distinction between science fiction and fantasy. If a story is set in a world that follows the same rules as ours, it's science fiction. If it's set in a world that doesn't follow our rules, it's fantasy. A fantasy story, however, does have its own set of internally consistent rules. Good fantasy must establish a new set of natural laws and explain them right away. Readers need to know what sort of fantasy world they are entering.

When starting your writing, you will need ideas. Card believes that story ideas develop gradually and ripen in the mind. Things that you may have thought of years ago will combine with other separate ideas and gradually grow into stories. An early draft of the story should be written with the knowledge that it will be discarded. The first draft could also be scraps of dialogue, maps and sketches, brief histories. Ideas come from everywhere. A writer always carries around an "Idea Net" for capturing them. It consists of three questions: "Why," "How," and "What result."



Creating a World

When building your world, you need to keep certain rules in mind. Magic, for instance, should have definite boundaries. Don't let your reader think that anything can happen. Usually there has to be some kind of price paid for magic use. The more powerful the magic is, the greater the sacrifice that must be made.

Both people and places must have a past. Historical reasons must have led up to this point. The past should have visible effects on the present. Characters need biographies. What events led these persons to where they are now? What were they doing before and what changes may have occurred in their lives?

Fantasy writers need to think about language. People who come from different worlds and different lands ought to be speaking different languages, though there could be a trade language that everyone uses. All words should be given in English unless they name something that there is no English word for. Inventing new languages might seem like fun, but unless you are a linguistic expert like J.R.R. Tolkien, you are better to stick with English. It's only when you want to name some special thing that is untranslatable that you should employ invented language.

Creating Characters

Steve Rasnic Tem has some advice for creating fantasy characters. A character is connected with context in which he or she lives. Readers must be able to see how a person's world shapes his or her personality. Writers might want to look at this concept in terms of dream theory. This states that every object in a dream is a piece of the dreamer. It is a good theory to apply to fantasy fiction writing. All pieces fit together to create one object. Character, setting, atmosphere are all part of the same whole. Many writers do this intuitively in fantastic stories. The process should be become conscious and deliberate.

Specific details make up an essential part of the story. The greatly detailed descriptions of places and backgrounds and histories in Tolkien help define the identities of the characters. Things that happen in the plot can also tell us about the sorts of characters we are dealing with. The fact that an extraordinary event happens to a particular person reveals something about that person.

What's in a Name?

Thomas Millstead tells us that fantasy fiction tries to go beneath the surface of things to touch the psychological depths. For this reason, appropriate sounding names are important. The name "Dracula" is frightening just because of its sound. If his name had been Cuthbert, he just wouldn't have had same effect. The names must be kept compatible with the tone and texture of the story.

Originality

According to James Kisner, as writers we must train our imaginations to "recognize and sort out the mundane, the overused, and the trivial." Good writers are like children in that they see the world from a new and fresh perspective. One good way to find out what is not original is simply to read. You should be familiar with the major writers in the field that you are writing in. Here are several novels that have been recommended by respected writers.

The best-remembered novels of fantasy:

The Lord of the Rings by J.R.R. Tolkien
The Once and Future King by T.H. White
The Wizard of Earthsea by Ursula K. LeGuin
The Chronicles of Narnia by C.S. Lewis
The Gormenghast Trilogy by Mervyn Peake
Watership Down by Richard Adams
The Mabinogion Series by Evangeline Walton
The Hobbit by J.R.R. Tolkien
Mythago Wood by Robert Holdstock
The Riddlemaster of Hed by Patricia A. McKillip

It is also important not to read too heavily in just one genre. Writers ought to have an awareness of all types of contemporary fiction, including classic works.

After reading one novel in a particular genre, you should read several others in the same genre to see what is similar and what is different. Do not confine yourself to your favourite authors. Make sure that you experience a broad range of different writers. Reading bad fiction can be helpful too; it teaches you what not to do. Publishers often have writers' guidelines that they will send to potential authors. These will include a "laundry list" of overdone subjects and tired old plots to avoid. Remember also that TV series, comic books, and movies have used and re-used many ideas before, so you should avoid repeating these plots also.

Swords and Sorcerers

Sword and sorcery fiction is a sub-genre of fantasy. It is defined by certain characteristic features that seem to have been first defined by Robert E. Howard's Conan stories and then continued in the work of Fritz Leiber, Michael Moorcock, and L. Sprague de Camp. A story of this type must include three elements: 1) an imaginary setting resembling the medieval or ancient world; 2) magic; and 3) a powerful heroic warrior as the main character.

Darrell Schweitzer gives several pieces of advice for writing a sword and sorcery tale. First, use plain language. Even though you want your story to sound like it comes from ancient times, it is better not to attempt to mimic the archaic prose style of centuries old epics. Such writing may end up sounding more comical than historic.

Second, make sure you know what a barbarian is exactly. Understand the historical context in which real barbarians lived. In order for your story to make

sense, it also needs to have more than just warriors, wizards, and maidens. Remember that in a fully believable world there have to be people who make the weapons, build the castles, and cook the food. To write a story with an authentic feel, it is necessary to know the physical details of armed melee combat,



horseback riding, and other barbaric activities. Be sure you know the different types of weapons and how they are used.

Next, you must make sure that magic is an integral part of the story. Magic is what really makes a fantasy story fantastic, so it should always play a central role in the plot. Just make sure that the magic is consistent and that it has certain limits. A sorcerer or magical item will have to follow certain rules in order to function. No person or thing should be all-powerful. Even the greatest wizard or most potent artefact should have a weakness.

Finally, you need an action-driven plot. The story ought to be fast moving with plenty of physical

conflict. Exciting events should occur early in the story and ought to continue at a rapid pace throughout the rest of the book. There is room for a bit of humour, but above all, the story should be flashy and fun.

What does it all mean?

What are the psychological reasons that people read and write fantasy stories? In “The Psychology of Horror and Fantasy Fiction,” Katherine Ramsland offers some thoughts. She explains that our most immediate experience of ourselves is from the inside. Our own personal viewpoint puts us in a world that is uncertain. We live ambiguous lives where the immediate experiences can rarely be captured in theoretical thought. By the time we are able to frame an inner experience within theory, it has already past. This is what Kierkegaard meant when he said that life must be lived forwards, but can only be understood backwards. There are few absolutes to guide our decisions. This blurry existence causes us much anxiety.

To deal with this dilemma, human beings often try to see themselves from the outside, as rational objects that can be contemplated by mathematics and science. We view the world as a measurable, categorized, and predictable mechanized entity that can be precisely described in language and logical concepts. This view tries to eliminate the mystery, clear up the ambiguities, and lead us toward a more certain way of living. This view of the world negates our personal selves. We disappear into the masses of other objects. We find security in existing as non-entities. But we can never completely escape ourselves. There are still parts of our humanity that cannot be grasped in the way that planets, insects,

and molecules can. We are not fully accessible to the scientific viewpoint. If we do not face what we are, we risk losing our integrity as human beings. Yet the mind does try to preserve itself. We have both a conscious and an unconscious yearning for something that will pull us back into our full humanity. Fantasy is one of our methods for re-integrating ourselves. Fantasy puts us in a situation where we don't have all the answers. It reminds us that there is still that mysterious aspect of our being that only the individual viewpoint can reach.

References

Card, Orson Scott. (1990). *How to write science fiction and fantasy*. Cincinnati: Writer's Digest Books.

Williamson, J.N. (ed.).(1987). “How to write tales of Horror, Fantasy, & Science Fiction” Cincinnati: Writer's Digest Books.