

Author preface

So you want to write fantasy, and guide readers to places where wishes matter more than facts. Does that mean your imagination is teeming with exotic places, heroic people, strange creatures, and the mysterious forces of magic? Have you been building a wondrous, unique, and special world in your imagination? Has the day now come to write a novel set in that world? Are you thinking large scope, with a plot that spans several volumes and a cast of hundreds?

Perhaps you love fantasy but you don't feel ready as yet to tackle a novel and would rather focus on short stories as you hone your craft. Tackling a few thousand words at a time—instead of a thousand pages—is a very sensible way to start your writing apprenticeship. Although this book will be focusing primarily on novel writing, short story writers will find the chapters on plotting, viewpoint, character design, scene and sequel construction, and climax helpful as well.

How do you begin your urban fantasy or epic quest? What do you do first? How do you organize your ideas, develop a plot, create characters that last from start to finish without crumbling, and move the story all the way to its conclusion? What's involved in writing a rollicking good story, one that others will enjoy reading?

My training and experience as a novelist—with over forty books published—has taught me answers to such questions. I began writing fiction when very young, and I stubbornly struggled with knotty plot dilemmas, characters that didn't always say or do what I wanted, and stories that hit dead ends,

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until I finally found the Professional Writing program at the University of Oklahoma and learned not only what writing craft is but how to trust it.

As a novelist, I've experienced the sublime pleasure of writing a story where everything goes well. I've suffered through the misery of stories where nothing seems to work. I've written my heart and guts into some of my novels, and I've written books during personal situations so distracting that only my formal training in the writing craft kept me on course. I know what it's like to ache to put my characters onto the page. I understand the frustration of being stuck and baffled, with no idea of how to fix the problem in front of me. And I am grateful for having done the time, and sweated through the drills and exercises, and paid my dues in order to become published.

Writing is not easy. It takes thought, commitment, and hard work to learn what you're doing. And after your first publication—or your twentieth—those same qualities remain necessary in putting together a short story or a novel. Each new plot and set of characters brings some unique challenge—and that's one reason I continue to find writing exciting and fun, year after year.

In my teaching career, I've coached numerous students who were adept at pouring their creative, imaginative abilities into world-building, yet enrolled in my classes with only the vaguest notion of how to plot, write cohesive scenes, or design dimensional characters. I firmly believe that there should not be a veil of mystery draped over the creation of viable stories.

Therefore, this book is all about my parting the veil and explaining to you what is often a simple—although not always easy—process in crafting fantasy fiction.

The rules, writing principles, formulas, tips, and suggestions that I've included are based on an archetypal pattern of story that's existed in Western civilization since antiquity. I call it elemental story design, and its appeal has touched readers across time and generations. Its foundations draw from myths,

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legends, folklore, definitions of good and evil, and both the shortcomings of human nature and its capacity for heroism.

Fantasy is the mystic of fiction. It requires readers to believe in magic and the supernatural, to accept the unexplainable as a normal part of the setting. And although fantasy expects readers to believe these things “just because” and offers no rational basis for them, fantasy is not illogical.

All fantasy stories—whether ranging from clock punk to Jasper Fforde’s Thursday Next novels to Neil Gaiman’s yarns—operate within parameters set by their authors. And although those boundaries may be fantastical, or possibly bizarre, they are the rules of that story world. Fantasy itself is an enormous, elastic genre that carries its share of beloved traditions, stereotypes, and dear old writing masters. Yet it’s adaptive enough to span what’s hip and edgy, deconstructed fairy tales, Goth, punk, and alternate history. New writers are shaking up old concepts all the time, keeping fantasy alive and fresh.

In exchange for their willingness to “believe,” readers expect fantasy writers to lead them to wondrous places never imagined before. Willing to disconnect from rationality in order to step onto train platform nine and three-quarters, they seek to explore concepts that have no basis in reality as the actual world knows it. They anticipate visiting places where wondrous things can happen with the wave of a wand or the chanting of a spell.

Despite the many subgenres within fantasy, I separate it into two large, basic divisions: urban fantasy and traditional fantasy. Not because of their settings, but because of their mindset.

Urban fantasy began as a variant of dark fantasy and horror, and since the 1990s it has become the dominant preference of modern readers. It blends the supernatural with thriller or mystery plots served up in *film noir* atmosphere. It stems from a modern, contemporary mindset. Although Good remains distinct from Evil, and Light separate from Dark, writers tend to shade those distinctions in the best *noir* tradition.

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Readers—eager to escape mundane jobs and over-scheduled, high-pressured lifestyles—walk the edge in the pages of urban fantasy. They experience danger and the risk of death safely at home while vicariously seducing sexy vampires, outwitting evil fairies, and generally kicking supernatural butt. No matter how intense the story grows, in the end, predators and monsters will not prevail against the protagonist.

Traditional fantasy centers on power/political struggles or straightforward action-adventure. It operates from a medieval or historical mindset, and its roots stretch all the way back to the dawn of storytelling, to Homer and earlier, to the origin of myth itself. Traditional fantasy's primary appeal lies in the transformation of the protagonist from ordinary to heroic.

An apparently ordinary protagonist leaves home, or finds a large blue dragon's egg in the forest, or is apprenticed to a mysterious man called the Spook, and in consequence becomes a larger-than-life hero, able to meet challenges and survive danger. The evolution of the character—whether through training or dangerous experiences—prepares him or her for the big showdown against some force of evil at the end.

Readers of traditional fantasy vicariously experience the chance to leave home for exciting adventure, to be trained in heroic combat and/or in magical powers, to become larger than life, to grow from ordinary into someone with an extraordinary Destiny.

Whether you prefer dragons, vampires, or elves that drive tanks, there's room in all types of fantasy for everyone and everything both imaginable and unimaginable.

For the duration of this book, you and I are going to be a collaborative team. Your job is to bring the talent and story premise. Mine is to supply the nuts and bolts—or magic formula, if you will—of how stories are built.

Although some examples have been invented to illustrate points of technique, many are excerpts drawn from my own published fiction under my real name and various pseudonyms such as Jay D. Blakeney, Sean Dalton, and C. Aubrey Hall.

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The latter have been selected only because they demonstrate whatever technique I'm discussing. When other authors or novels are mentioned or recommended, they have been chosen in particular because I feel they illustrate story design clearly enough for you to observe and study. Also, I will be referring to film examples at times—not because I'm veering into screenplay writing but because I feel the visual imagery of movies can spark a prose writer's imagination.

I've organized *The fantasy fiction formula* to assist both beginners and intermediate writers. If you're in the former camp, I suggest that you read the chapters in order from start to finish. I've arranged them in the way I personally approach a book's design—from the basic conception of an idea, to the development of a plot outline, to the writing itself through beginning, middle, and ending. If you're in the latter group of writers, somewhat experienced in creating fiction, then by all means feel free to read the chapters in any order that appeals to you.

Now, let's get started.