



Fantasy

By
Michael McCollum

I have a love/hate relationship with Anne McCaffrey, one that she knows nothing about. Anne is one of the masters of science fiction and fantasy, a giant in the field. I, on the other hand, am merely the owner of my own Internet bookstore and publishing company, trying to eke out a living in the new and unknown world of cyberspace. Anne, who began writing about 1950, has sold more copies of just one of her *Dragons of Pern* books than I have sold in my whole life. That isn't why I have occasionally become perturbed at her, however.

The reason is due to our last names, which are remarkably similar. McCollum, it seems, is directly to the right of McCaffrey on most bookstore shelves. This gives me an easy landmark whenever I go into a bookstore to look for my books. All I need do is find the three feet of shelf devoted to Anne McCaffrey, and then look next door. If I find that her downstream neighbor (alphabetically speaking) is Patricia McKillip, I know that none of my books are in stock. Lately, of course, this has been the standard state of affairs since my former publisher has much less incentive to sell my books since I retrieved my rights and went into business for myself. Still, in earlier years, I would often find that the three to six inches of shelf directly to the right of Anne McCaffrey would have a few Michael McCollum books stuffed into them.

If you think finding my books on the shelf made me happy, you are wrong. Like most authors, I viewed the results of my various bookstore expeditions in one of two ways. Either my books were there, indicating that they weren't selling as fast as I thought they should; or else, they weren't there, indicating that the bookstore wasn't reordering. Either way, I left the store in a mildly depressed state. Other writers will testify that they have had the same experience. That is because our personalities won't allow us to be happy with the state of our sales, regardless of how successful we are.

What has my proximity to Anne McCaffrey on the shelves had to do with my love/hate relationship with her? Everything. You see, nothing irks me quite so much as discovering that one of the seemingly endless supply of "McCaffrey" books has slipped over the boundary and is covering up the small "McCollum" pile next door.

Actually, I met Anne when we both attended a science fiction convention in Phoenix 6-7 years ago. I went up and introduced myself at the "meet the pros" party, explained that I was her neighbor on the shelves, and then asked for a favor. Unsuspecting, she smiled and graciously said that she would do anything within reason. Putting on my best expression of mock concern, I said, "Could you please keep your damned books out of my piles?" Luckily, she laughed. Otherwise, I might have been lynched by her legion of fans.

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Michael McCollum, Proprietor
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NOVELS

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The Makers searched for the secret to faster-than-light travel for 100,000 years. Their chosen instruments were the Life Probes, which they launched in every direction to seek out advanced civilizations among the stars. One such machine searching for intelligent life encounters 21st century Earth. It isn't sure that it has found any...

2. Procyon's Promise - ^{US}\$5.00

Three hundred years after humanity made its deal with the Life Probe to search out the secret of faster-than-light travel, the descendants of the original expedition return to Earth in a starship. They find a world that has forgotten the ancient contract. No matter. The colonists have overcome far greater obstacles in their single-minded drive to redeem a promise made before any of them were born...

3. Antares Dawn - US\$5.00

When the super giant star Antares exploded in 2512, the human colony on Alta found their pathway to the stars gone, isolating them from the rest of human space for more than a century. Then one day, a powerful warship materialized in the system without warning. Alarmed by the sudden appearance of such a behemoth, the commanders of the Altan Space Navy dispatched one of their most powerful ships to investigate. What ASNS Discovery finds when they finally catch the intruder is a battered hulk manned by a dead crew.

That is disturbing news for the Altans. For the dead battleship could easily have defeated the whole of the Altan navy. If it could find Alta, then so could whomever it was that beat it. Something must be done...

4. Antares Passage - US\$5.00

After more than a century of isolation, the paths between stars are again open and the people of Alta in contact with their sister colony on Sandar. The opening of the foldlines has not been the unmixed blessing the Altans had supposed, however.

For the reestablishment of interstellar travel has brought with it news of the Ryall, an alien race whose goal is the extermination of humanity. If they are to avoid defeat at the hands of the aliens, Alta must seek out the military might of Earth. However, to reach Earth requires them to dive into the heart of a supernova.

5. Antares Victory – First Time in Print – US\$7.00

After a century of warfare, humanity finally discovered the Achilles heel of the Ryall, their xenophobic reptilian foe. Spica – Alpha Virginis – is the key star system in enemy space. It is the hub through which all Ryall starships must pass, and if humanity can only capture and hold it, they will strangle the Ryall war machine and end their threat to humankind forever.

It all seemed so simple in the computer simulations: Advance by stealth, attack without warning, strike swiftly with overwhelming power. Unfortunately, conquering the Ryall proves the easy part. With the key to victory in hand, Richard and Bethany Drake discover that they must also conquer human nature if they are to bring down the alien foe ...

6. Thunderstrike! - US\$6.00

The new comet found near Jupiter was an incredible treasure trove of water ice and rock. Immediately, the water-starved Luna Republic and the Sierra Corporation, a leader in asteroid mining, were squabbling over rights to the new resource. However, all thoughts of profit and fame were abandoned when a scientific expedition discovered that the comet's trajectory placed it on a collision course with Earth!

As scientists struggled to find a way to alter the comet's course, world leaders tried desperately to restrain mass panic, and two lovers quarreled over the direction the comet was to take, all Earth waited to see if humanity had any future at all...

7. The Clouds of Saturn - US\$5.00

When the sun flared out of control and boiled Earth's oceans, humanity took refuge in a place that few would have predicted. In the greatest migration in history, the entire human race took up residence among the towering clouds and deep clear-air canyons of Saturn's upper atmosphere. Having survived the traitor star, they returned to the all-too-human tradition of internecine strife. The new city-states of Saturn began to resemble those of ancient Greece, with one group of cities taking on the role of militaristic Sparta...

8. The Sails of Tau Ceti – US\$5.00

Starhopper was humanity's first interstellar probe. It was designed to search for intelligent life beyond the solar system. Before it could be launched, however, intelligent life found Earth. The discovery of an alien light sail inbound at the edge of the solar system generated considerable excitement in scientific circles. With the interstellar probe nearing completion, it gave scientists the opportunity to launch an expedition to meet the aliens while they were still in space. The second surprise came when *Starhopper's* crew boarded the alien craft. They found beings that, despite their alien physiques, were surprisingly compatible with humans. That two species so similar could have evolved a mere twelve light years from one another seemed too coincidental to be true.

One human being soon discovered that coincidence had nothing to do with it...

9. Gibraltar Earth – First Time in Print — \$6.00

It is the 24th Century and humanity is just gaining a toehold out among the stars. Stellar Survey Starship *Magellan* is exploring the New Eden system when they encounter two alien spacecraft. When the encounter is over, the score is one human scout ship and one alien aggressor destroyed. In exploring the wreck of the second alien ship, spacers discover a survivor with a fantastic story.

The alien comes from a million-star Galactic Empire ruled over by a mysterious race known as the Broa. These overlords are the masters of this region of the galaxy and they allow no competitors. This news presents Earth's rulers with a problem. As yet, the Broa are ignorant of humanity's existence. Does the human race retreat to its one small world, quaking in fear that the Broa will eventually discover Earth? Or do they take a more aggressive approach?

Whatever they do, they must do it quickly! Time is running out for the human race...

10. Gibraltar Sun – First Time in Print — \$7.00

The expedition to the Crab Nebula has returned to Earth and the news is not good. Out among the stars, a million systems have fallen under Broan domination, the fate awaiting Earth should the Broa ever learn of its existence. The problem would seem to allow but three responses: submit meekly to slavery, fight and risk extermination, or hide and pray the Broa remain ignorant of humankind for at least a few more generations. Are the hairless apes of Sol III finally faced with a problem for which there is no acceptable solution?

While politicians argue, Mark Rykand and Lisa Arden risk everything to spy on the all-powerful enemy that is beginning to wonder at the appearance of mysterious bipeds in their midst...

11. Gridlock and Other Stories - US\$5.00

Where would you visit if you invented a time machine, but could not steer it? What if you went out for a six-pack of beer and never came back? If you think nuclear power is dangerous, you should try black holes as an energy source — or even scarier, solar energy! Visit the many worlds of Michael McCollum. I guarantee that you will be surprised!

Non-Fiction Books

12. The Art of Writing, Volume I - US\$10.00

Have you missed any of the articles in the Art of Writing Series? No problem. The first sixteen articles (October, 1996-December, 1997) have been collected into a book-length work of more than 72,000 words. Now you can learn about character, conflict, plot, pacing, dialogue, and the business of writing, all in one document.

13. The Art of Writing, Volume II - US\$10.00

This collection covers the Art of Writing articles published during 1998. The book is 62,000 words in length and builds on the foundation of knowledge provided by Volume I of this popular series.

14. The Art of Science Fiction, Volume I - US\$10.00

Have you missed any of the articles in the Art of Science Fiction Series? No problem. The first sixteen articles (October, 1996-December, 1997) have been collected into a book-length work of more than 70,000 words. Learn about science fiction techniques and technologies, including starships, time machines, and rocket propulsion. Tour the Solar System and learn astronomy from the science fiction writer's viewpoint. We don't care where the stars appear in the terrestrial sky. We want to know their true positions in space. If you are planning to write an interstellar romance, brushing up on your astronomy may be just what you need.

15. The Art of Science Fiction, Volume II - US\$10.00

This collection covers the *Art of Science Fiction* articles published during 1998. The book is 67,000 words in length and builds on the foundation of knowledge provided by Volume I of this popular series.

16. The Astrogator's Handbook – Expanded Edition and Deluxe Editions

The Astrogator's Handbook has been very popular on Sci Fi – Arizona. The handbook has star maps that show science fiction writers where the stars are located in space rather than where they are located in Earth's sky. Because of the popularity, we are expanding the handbook to show nine times as much space and more than ten times as many stars. The expanded handbook includes the positions of 3500 stars as viewed from Polaris on 63 maps. This handbook is a useful resource for every science fiction writer and will appeal to anyone with an interest in astronomy.

Anne McCaffrey is the leading practitioner of one of the main sub-genres of science fiction, a type of writing that I refer to as “that dragon crap!” Don’t get me wrong. She writes it beautifully. It’s just that my tastes don’t happen to lean in that direction, and except for the initial *Pern* book that was serialized in *Analog Science Fiction* more than 30 years ago, I haven’t read any of her dragon books. I like my science fiction with the nuts-and-bolts left in and the various dragon books just don’t explain the background of the stories in the detail that allows me to suspend my disbelief.

Not that Anne McCaffrey is exclusively a writer of dragon stories. She also has the distinction of having written what many (including me) consider the finest short story in the history of the field. I refer to *The Ship Who Sang*, an evocative little piece that will cause even the hardest heart to melt.

For the past ten years I have given a lecture titled “Spacecraft Propulsion and Science Fiction Writing,” in which I discuss the technology of rockets and the effect that technology has on the plot. Those of you who are regulars at Sci Fi – Arizona will recognize much of it from the article I did on rocket propulsion in 1997 (*The Art of Science Fiction, Volume 1*, “Rocket Propulsion.”) Because I lecture for about half an hour on the technical details of various spaceship propulsion systems, I always like to end by reminding people that *The Ship Who Sang* has not one iota of science in it. Yet, it works spectacularly well as a science fiction story because science fiction isn’t really about technology. Like all fiction, it’s about people.

You may have noted by my comments to this point that there is a schism in speculative fiction, one where I am on one side and Anne McCaffrey is on the other. That schism has existed since at least World War II and has become much more pronounced in the last few decades. For, like Christianity five centuries ago, the practitioners of the art of telling speculative stories have divided into two competing ideologies: science fiction and fantasy.

“Huh?” you ask, startled. “I thought they were the same thing!”

Actually, they are and they aren’t. For many years both sub-genres coexisted under the generic label “science fiction,” although some purists, notably *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, have always insisted on keeping a bright white line between them. There is another magazine where fantasy and science fiction have long been treated separately. That is my old stomping ground, *Analog Science Fiction*. *Analog* is the temple of high tech (hard) science fiction and it takes a miracle for any fantasy stories to appear in its pages. Miracles do happen occasionally. As I noted earlier, that was where I read the first *Pern* book (*Dragonflight*, I think) many years ago. In fact, there are those who believe that Anne McCaffrey’s *Pern* books are actually science fiction, but that those who inhabit them are in no position to know the science that underpins their great flying dragons. Therefore, they can’t explain it to the readers.

So what, exactly, is the difference between Fantasy and Science Fiction, and how did this schism come about in the first place? What follows is an explanation by one who is not a fantasy enthusiast, but who appreciates good writing, whatever the genre. If there are those of my readers who take exception to the opinions expressed, feel free to write an opposing article. I will be happy to publish it in our guest article section.

The Difference Between Science Fiction And Fantasy

For many years, the professional association for science fiction and fantasy writers was known as SFWA, *The Science Fiction Writers of America*. There were many complaints that the name was too restrictive, both because 1) it is a worldwide organization, not just one for American writers, and 2) *fantasy writers don't write science fiction!* This is the reason why the organization has been renamed SFFWA, *The Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America*. I wouldn't be surprised to see it renamed in another ten years, perhaps to *The Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers Association*.

One of the problems with science fiction enthusiasts is that we are too quick to highlight our differences and divide ourselves into warring camps. For instance, an argument has raged for most of my life about exactly what constitutes science fiction. There are those who say that science fiction is literature about the future, even though much of it takes place in the past. Purists maintain that it is literature about scientists (period!). If it isn't about scientists, it isn't science fiction. By this definition, *Frankenstein* is science fiction, but *Star Wars* isn't. Robert Heinlein preferred the term "speculative fiction," and as I have said before in this series, I prefer the more practical definition of "that which the science fiction editors are currently buying."

The enthusiasm for coming up with a definitive description of the field has been driven by the desire of many to associate with their fellow enthusiasts and to read those who disagree with them out of our club. This tendency has resulted in keeping the club small and exclusive, and just a little bit inbred, and is one of the primary reasons why science fiction remains a literary ghetto to this day.

Note that "fantasy" does not show up explicitly in any of these definitions of science fiction. However, fantasy is very definitely "speculative fiction" and sometimes "that which the science fiction editors are buying." What then *is* the difference between science fiction and fantasy?

Science fiction has an underpinning of science. In other words, the physical principles cited in the story are real, or at least they could be real at some time in the future. Actually, even this is too restrictive. Science fiction doesn't have to hew rigidly to known or suspected principles. We can make up things as easily as fantasy writers do. However, we must develop at least a "feeling" in the readers that what we are writing about is realistic, that it *could* happen. And having attained this feeling of "realness," we must maintain it for as long as the reader continues reading our story.

Fantasy, on the other hand, makes no pretense to be scientific or real. Its underpinnings are myth and legend. It is a literature that is built on things that everyone knows either do not exist or can't happen, but which they agree to believe so long as they are reading the story. Thus, fantasy is the realm of magicians and elves, dragons and demons, swordsmen and princesses, ghosts and succubae.

Rather than mine the body of scientific knowledge developed over the last half millennium, fantasy writers go back to a much earlier time to obtain the raw material of their storytelling. They return to an era when there was no science, only legend; when the universe was a mysterious and magical place and literally *anything* could happen, and was reputed to have done so just over the horizon.

Fantasy is populated with the fantastic and unreal, whereas science fiction is populated by the equally fantastic, but potentially real. Other than that, there is not a great deal of difference between the way the two genres tell a story. They are, in effect, two literatures that stem from a common root, but look at the world slightly differently.

The other difference between the two fields involves the composition of their audiences. Science fiction began life as a literature for adolescent boys and retains much of that same appeal today. It is a predominately male undertaking. This is not to say that there are no female science fiction writers. There are many good ones. But the overwhelming majority of science fiction readers and writers are male.

Fantasy appeals more to the feminine side of the readership, so much so that it is almost as popular with women writers and readers as romance novels. In fantasy you are more likely to find the heroine is the lead character of the piece, and that the outlook tends to be much less awash in testosterone. All such generalizations are dangerous, of course, but this one has more truth to it than not. Fantasy is a “kinder and gentler” literature, except, of course, that people are always getting skewered, or having their hearts ripped from their chests, or being eaten by giant snakes.

The Similarities Between SF and F

Having been raised in the same crib, science fiction and fantasy share a great many characteristics. One of these is the basic nature of the stories and how they are told. At its heart, a science fiction story is an intellectual puzzle. We present the reader with a series of “facts” and attempt to keep them entertained until we can put the pieces of the plot together into a pleasing whole. It is the intellectual enjoyment of seeing the world from a new perspective that drives science fiction.

The same is true for fantasy. In a fantasy story, a series of “natural laws” are presented to the reader along with an interesting situation. The writer then goes on to explore how the characters interact with these “laws” and the reader attempts to figure out where the writer is going before the writer gets there.

The only difference in the two approaches is that the SF puzzle is based on what is reputed to be a real operating principle of the universe (discovered or undiscovered), while the fantasy puzzle is based on magical, paranormal, or other mythical principles.

Regardless of whether you are writing a science fiction story or a fantasy story, once the rules are set up, they cannot be changed. This is an especially important point in fantasy where magical things occur. If you have postulated a universe in which magic exists, why not use a little magic to get the hero out of a dangerous situation? Because the readers will throw down your work in disgust if you do.

So one of the primary rules of fantasy writing is that the *Deus ex Machina* (God takes a hand) remains as forbidden as in any other kind of writing. Once you’ve set up your universe’s rules, you must play by them no matter how inconvenient. Otherwise, the readers will cease caring about your characters. After all, if your hero runs around inside an impervious shield, why worry about the guy with the knife hiding in the bushes around the next bend?

In this way, when writing fantasy it is often best to think of it as realistic science fiction, but with a set of natural laws that are different.

Fantasy and Science Fiction Can Coexist if They Want To

If fantasy and science fiction are two branches of the same tree, why has this schism developed between them since the heyday of the pulp magazines in the 1930s and

1940s? One of the reasons is the one I discussed earlier. There is something in the human psyche that causes each of us to demand everything our own way; what I refer to as the “Everything that isn’t illegal shall be compulsory!” rule. Thus, anyone who disagrees with us in even the tiniest detail is immediately banished to the outer darkness. Science fiction readers and fans are neither more nor less susceptible to this disease than the general public, but the tendency to fractionate has conspired to keep the field small.

If you would like to see how science fiction and fantasy are able to coexist, there is a very good example on television. I refer to one of my favorite programs, *The X-Files*. If you haven’t seen it (and just about everyone I know has at least sampled the program), *The X-Files* follows the adventures of two FBI agents, Fox Mulder and Dana Scully, as they investigate a series of cases that can best be described as weird.

Mulder is the believer on the team. He believes devoutly in UFOs and paranormal events of all kinds (although this season his faith has been shaken). Scully is a medical doctor with a deep-rooted faith in science. She was assigned to the X-files at the FBI as a common-sense counterweight to Mulder’s offbeat enthusiasms. Her faith in her rational position has also been shaken in recent episodes, to the point where there has been nearly a role reversal. Presumably this won’t last too many more episodes and we can all get back to the original premise.

“Is *The X-Files* fantasy or science fiction?” you might ask. Actually, it is both. About half the episodes involve UFOs, the evil government doing something mysteriously nefarious, or strange life forms that are both disgusting and dangerous. These episodes are pure science fiction. They take no departure from conventional science, or from what science might be like in the future. The red aliens and gray aliens are presented merely as creatures from another world who are here for reasons of their own. The government cabal is out to do us harm in some mysterious way, but the motivation is mundanely venal, not magical.

The other half of the episodes are pure fantasy. They rely on the supernatural and the occult. In one episode for instance, Scully and Mulder actually came face to face with the devil, which had taken the form of a malevolent school nurse. I’m not talking about a demon from hell, but rather about Satan himself. Frankly, when I realized whom it was they were investigating, I began to fear for our heroes’ lives. You would think such an experience would have cured Scully of her skepticism, but of course, series television is picaresque rather than linear. (Picaresque is a technical writing term that means “episodic.” Essentially, the characters are back the next week, seemingly unaffected by the horrendous experience they underwent the previous week.)

Then, of course, there are the episodes that are difficult to quantify. Maybe the strange events that go on are the result of natural phenomena and maybe they are caused by supernatural beings. The *X-Files* writers certainly aren’t going to enlighten you. The viewers must judge for themselves.

If it is your intent to write either science fiction or fantasy, you could do a lot worse than studying *The X-Files* to see how it is done. The only problem is making sure that you are able to distinguish the science fiction episodes from the fantasy ones. With *The X-Files*, it isn’t always easy.

The Kinds of Fantasy

As in the case of science fiction, fantasy comes in all sizes and flavors. There are stories that are written like slice of life vignettes, except for the devil who lives next door; and others where the everyday landscape is so transformed by magical elements that you can barely recognize it. So just as the overall world of speculative fiction can be subdivided into science fiction and fantasy, the world of fantasy writing can be subdivided into numerous categories. The taxonomy that follows is far from official. It is merely the way fantasy looks to one who does not practice it. You, of course, may divide things up the way they make sense to you.

Realistic Fantasy

You would think that “realistic fantasy” is an oxymoron, a contradiction of terms. However, I find that this is one type of fantasy that I enjoy immensely. Realistic fantasy is essentially fantasy written as though it was science fiction. This is where the supernatural or magical elements are included in a story, but the story is subsequently treated as though the magic or supernatural is merely another form of technology. Two writers have been especially successful at this: Randall Garrett and Larry Niven. Not surprisingly, both are principally science fiction writers.

Starting in the mid-1960s, Randall Garrett wrote a series of “Lord Darcy” stories. These are a form of alternate universe story in that they tell of a world where things didn’t quite go the way they have on our timeline. In Lord Darcy’s universe, Richard the Lion Hearted was wounded in the siege of the castle at Chalus in the Limousin section of France, but recovered from his wounds (he died in our universe). Having come so close to death, he reformed his ways and became Good King Richard during the last twenty years of his life. The result was that England and France united into the Angevan Empire, which continued with an unbroken line of rule down through the twentieth century. As a result, the Reformation did not occur, Germany never consolidated into a single country, and Poland remained the other superpower in the world.

The one thing that makes the Lord Darcy series fascinating is that it is a world where magic is possible, where “magician” is just another trade, and where supernatural means are often used to commit crimes. The series then is a combination of science fiction and fantasy, and classic murder mystery (Lord Darcy is the chief criminal investigator for the Duke of Normandy). If you think it is easy to shoehorn all of these disparate elements into a single story and make it work, then you should give it a try sometime.

As Lord Darcy’s faithful sidekick, Master Magician Sean O’Lochlain, keeps reminding him, magic is a technology. Spells must be cast just so, and heaven help the magician whose experimental technique is sloppy. One such allowed some of his own sweat droplets to fall into the boiling cauldron when he was whipping up a witch’s brew. He died when the spell backfired on him due to his sloppiness.

The stories were collected into various anthologies: *Too Many Magicians, Murder and Magic*, and *Lord Darcy Investigates* (1983-1988). All are currently out of print, although they are listed on Amazon.com. You should try to find them since reading the stories will give you a much better understanding of how to treat fantasy as science fiction – if, of course, that is your intent.

The other series of realistic fantasy stories that I enjoyed was by Larry Niven. This is his “Magician” series: “Not Long Until The End”, “What Do You Do With A Glass

Dagger?” and one whose title I forget. The Magician series also involves “magic as a technology.” Magic, it seems, is possible wherever there is an adequate supply of *mana*. Unfortunately, *mana* is a non-renewable resource and the magicians of the lost age consumed most of it through their too-profligate use of magic. Thus, magic is only possible in the modern age in those few places where efforts were made to conserve this valuable commodity, places like modern-day Transylvania.

Here, too, magic is a solid technology with a definable and inviolable set of rules. Building a magic machine is absolutely akin to building a mechanical one. First you get the raw materials and then you follow the assembly instructions carefully. If some hero-swordsman with a magic sword happens to be climbing your hill intent on murder while you frantically conjure a spell to stop him, then whether you live or die will depend on who reaches their goal first.

One example of how magic can successfully be passed off as science fiction: My first science fiction convention was the World Science Fiction Convention held in Phoenix in September, 1976. At that convention, Larry Niven gave us a preview of the plot of his new book, *The Magic Goes Away*. Having become aware that *mana* is a non-renewable resource, the magician and friends embark on a scheme to renew the Earth’s supply of this valuable material. Their thought is to pull the moon out of the sky and soft land it on the Earth in order to use its untapped *mana* reserves. Being non-scientific, the magician has no idea of just how large the moon truly is, so the scheme seems entirely reasonable to him.

(Although the plot is interesting, *The Magic Goes Away* is a disappointing book. Apparently Larry Niven’s heart wasn’t in it. Or perhaps it just didn’t come together the way he expected. Articles like this one can give you some techniques that will improve your writing, but they can’t tell you how to write a really good book. That is why writing is more art than science.)

Heroic Fantasy (Sword and Sorcery)

Heroic fantasy, after languishing in the pulps for fifty years or so, has burst out into the mainstream. For that we can all thank Arnold Schwarzenegger’s limited acting repertoire in the days when he was just beginning his career. The prototypical fantasy hero is Conan, a muscle-bound barbarian who talks little and who believes that any problem can be improved by giving it a couple of good whacks with a sword. In other words, the perfect role for the early Scharzenegger. Personally, I enjoy Conan books and movies immensely and not only because the women run around in them half-naked all of the time.

Conan is the invention of Robert E. Howard, who was a Texas momma’s boy. Howard said that he got the idea for Conan from watching oil workers one day. He wrote nearly a dozen compelling novels about the barbarian hero (and several other heroic fantasy pieces) in Cross Plains, Texas, until his mother died in 1936. He was so devoted to her that he committed suicide shortly thereafter.

The story of Howard and Conan illustrates an important point for writers. No matter how wimpy we may seem on the outside, we are all lions on the inside. It doesn’t really matter whether your hairline is receding to match your chin, whether your glasses are coke-bottle thick, whether or not you can fight your way out of a paper bag. At our

typewriters and computer screens, we're all ten feet tall (that's three meters for our foreign readers). The pen has always been mightier than the sword. All you need do is wield it well.

The spirit of heroic fantasy is captured in the paintings of Boris Vallejo, some of which are a bit racy for impressionable minds. In heroic fantasy, all men are strong and muscular, all women are beautiful and clad in only as much as the weather requires, and all problems are simple. Don't like the way things are going? Get out your sword. After all, it may make a bloody mess of things, but it has a miraculous way of clearing the mind – especially if the head that mind is contained in is separated from its shoulders.

Grand Fantasy (Tolkien)

The best-known fantasy works are J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit*, and *The Lord of the Rings*. In these books, Tolkien chronicles the history of the Middle-Earth, which is a fantasy world nearly as complex and detailed as the real world. This world is inhabited by balrogs, dwarves, elves, hobbits, orcs, and goblins. Tolkien's world is manufactured from whole cloth and a feat of imagination that is unequalled by any modern writer.

Tolkien's work is more than an imagined fairy tale, however. It also has a style unlike any other book. It is a style that must be experienced rather than explained. The following is an excerpt:

“By some curious chance one morning long ago in the quiet of the world, when there was less noise and more green, and the hobbits were still numerous and prosperous, and Bilbo Baggins was standing at his door after breakfast smoking an enormous long wooden pipe that reached nearly down to his woolly toes (neatly brushed) – Gandalf came by. Gandalf! If you had heard only a quarter of what I have heard about him, and I have only heard very little of all there is to hear, you would be prepared for any sort of remarkable tale. Tales and adventures sprouted up all over the place wherever he went, in the most extraordinary fashion. He had not been down that way under The Hill for ages and ages, not since his friend the Old Took died, in fact, and the hobbits had almost forgotten what he looked like. He had been away over The Hill and across The Water on business of his own since they were all small hobbit-boys and hobbit-girls. All that the unsuspecting Bilbo saw that morning was an old man with a staff. He had a tall pointed blue hat, a long grey cloak, a silver scarf over which a white beard.”

Essentially, if you would like to write Tolkien-style fantasy, you first need to read the works of the master, and then possibly steep yourself in Nineteenth Century literature. For the style is archaic and complicated, and it takes a skilled writer to pull it off successfully.

Myth Based Fantasy

The one commodity that human beings have generated aplenty in the last 50,000 years is myth. Every culture has their own and even though they share broad themes and common bases, there is literally an inexhaustible supply of them for the budding fantasy writer to mine. Once you have your base-myth in mind, there are a number of ways to approach the task.

I discussed Anne McCaffrey and her dragons above. The dragons of Pern were undoubtedly conceived using terrestrial dragon myths as their source. Virtually every

culture has some sort of dragon. There are the cute dragons of Walt Disney, the ornate dragons of Chinese folklore, and the vicious man-eating dragons of “Sir George and the Dragon” fame.

I don’t know exactly how Anne McCaffrey thought up her epic series, although I suspect it went something like this: “Wouldn’t it be neat if there really were such a thing as flying dragons, and people could ride them? How about if I postulate another world where that is possible?”

Another mythical animal that appears quite a lot in fantasy writing is Pegasus, the winged horse. Now the design of Pegasus is aerodynamically silly, basically just your snow-white horse with a pair of well proportioned wings attached. If you think about the problem of designing a horse to fly, it is considerably more difficult than human-powered flight. In fact, it took nearly twenty years following the invention of the airplane to build a machine sufficiently large and powerful to lift a horse into the air. When you consider the wingspan and muscles required to actually allow a horse to fly under its own power, it wouldn’t look anything like a horse. It would look like a Boeing 747 jetliner with hooves.

Yet, Pegasus is a compelling image and fantasy writers continue to use it without regard to the fact that it is physically impossible. Which, of course, is one of the ways you distinguish fantasy from science fiction. If you know that it is impossible, but choose to believe it anyway, then it must be fantasy.

One of the best myth stories I have read was written by L. Sprague De Camp back in the 1940s. It is “The Hardwood Pile,” a slice-of-life story about the operator of a lumberyard who, in addition to the problems of running his business, finds that he has a unique problem with a new load of hardwood planks. His yard has received a shipment of lumber cut from a tree in which a wood nymph lived. Not only has he received the lumber, the wood nymph has also taken up residence. The collision between mundane modern life and this ancient myth creature makes the story both believable and amusing.

Another of Sprague De Camp’s early stories is “Nothing in the Rules.” It involves the trials and tribulations of the coach of a women’s swimming team when the coach of a rival team imports a mermaid to compete against them. It is this juxtaposition between the mystical and the commonplace that give such stories their charm, and unlike a grand saga like Tolkien’s, they are relatively easy to write.

Supernatural Fantasy

Then there are the fantasy stories that appeal to our dark sides. These are the supernatural fantasies in which ghosts, goblins, ghouls, necromancers, demons, and witches reside. As noted above, about half of *The X-Files* episodes are devoted to supernatural fantasy. In the 1970s there was a television series based on supernatural fantasy that was a forerunner to *The X-Files*. That was *The Nightstalker* in which Darren McGaven played a reporter who was always stumbling across news stories that couldn’t be explained conventionally. You can still catch it in reruns on the SciFi Channel.

One subset of supernatural fantasy that has become very popular in recent years is the vampire story. This is primarily due to the efforts of Anne Rice. Not that vampires haven’t always been popular. There have probably been more *Dracula* movies than just about any other single subject.

Presumably, vampire legends were started when people were bit by bats, wolves, and other animals, and subsequently died of rabies. To my knowledge, no actual vampire has ever been discovered. This doesn't stop people from reading and writing about them, of course; and these efforts have ranged from the sublime to the ridiculous. One of the best *X-Files* of the past season involved a vampire pizza delivery boy who drugged his victims and then drank their blood with a set of fake fangs. After the FBI took his fangs away, his next victim reported serious gnaw marks on the neck. If you didn't see that particular episode, try to catch it in rerun. It has some of the subtlest humor you will find on television.

Conclusion

Despite people's recent attempts to categorize fantasy different from science fiction, the two remain closely related; and in fact, are merely different manifestations of the same brand of literature. Both fantasy and science fiction appeal to a reader's intellect, both attempt to explore worlds that are subtly or wildly different from our own, and both rely on the intelligence of the reading public for their continued existence. Whether you like your stories with blazing rocket ships or flying dragons is up to you. Most people write what they like to read. Remember, however, that just because magic is possible in your fictional world, you can't run around doing anything you want.

There are rules, you know. There are *always* rules!

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