



Sequels and Series

By
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Note: This is a reprint article that has been updated to reflect events that have occurred in my career these past few years.



Many people ask me why I decided to go into business as an INTERNET entrepreneur, bookstore owner, and publisher. Actually, it stems in part from a fifteen-year-long disagreement I had with my publishers over sequels. They loved sequels and I hated them. I've told the story before in other contexts, but it bears repeating here because, although publishers and writers are both vital ingredients in the publishing process, their interests are not necessarily congruent. That which is good for the publisher is not necessarily good for the writer, and vice versa. For me the long road to this realization began late on the evening of July 15, 1974. That was the night I got out my trusty, old Smith-Corona portable typewriter, rolled a piece of typing paper into the platen, and then began to write my first short story.

My aspirations that evening were fairly modest. All I really wanted to do was have a story make the cover of *Analog Science Fiction/Science Fact Magazine*. If I could someday have the cover story in *Analog*, I figured; I would be able to die happy. So, after having vacillated for six months over whether I had what it takes to become a writer, I finally screwed up my courage and began to compose my very first short story, "Morrison's Mountain." I worked on that story for nearly six weeks, writing and rewriting scenes until they read like scenes written by my favorite authors. I finished the final draft on August 30, 1974. To my utter amazement, when I read the story over one final time, it was as though I was reading a manuscript someone else had written. It actually sounded like a real piece of fiction! So, with a confidence rooted in ignorance, I popped my 7500-word opus into one of those ubiquitous 9" x 12" clasp envelopes (along with a similar self-addressed-stamped-envelope) and mailed it off to Ben Bova at *Analog*.

I didn't have long to wait. On September 9, 1974, exactly 10 days later, I received my self-addressed-stamped-envelope (SASE) back in my mailbox with a rejection letter and my manuscript inside. The rejection letter stated that while my story didn't quite meet their needs, they liked my style and I should try them again sometime.

From that moment on, I was hooked. Over the next three years I penned some twenty other short stories, novelettes, novellas, and even one novel (*Star Ranger*). Each time I finished a manuscript, I popped it into a brown clasp envelope, included the required SASE, and drove down to the post office so I could have the pleasure of putting

it into the mail slot myself. Despite my previous track record of zero sales, each time a manuscript went into the mail, I felt that little surge of anticipation that this was going to be the story that would finally sell. It was much the same feeling that keeps gold prospectors trudging through their lonely lives of isolation. (Actually, a gold prospector's life is less lonely than that of a writer. At least they have their burros to talk to while they search for precious metal. Writing, on the other hand, is a craft that must be done in total isolation.)

I can't say that I didn't get discouraged from time to time. Actually, I got discouraged every time I opened the mailbox to find an envelope with the address written in my own handwriting. Still, the infection that is the writing bug wouldn't let me quit. After moping around for a day or so, I would return to my Smith-Corona and continue pounding away.

My first professional sale as a writer wasn't a short story. It was an article on nuclear waste: "The Disposal of Nuclear Waste in Space," *Analog Science Fiction*, March 1978. I was paid \$250 for the article. That money made me a professional writer, although not a professional writer of fiction. Total success took another six months. In June 1978, I wrote a story called "Duty, Honor, Planet," based on a visit to Havasu Falls in the Grand Canyon. On July 28, 1978, I received the manuscript back in the mail. However, instead of a rejection letter, I found a personal letter from Ben Bova telling me that he liked the story, but that it was too slow moving, and I should cut 10% of the words. I was ecstatic, but my ecstasy was tempered by the postscript to the letter. Bova took the opportunity to announce that he was leaving *Analog*.

Despite the news that the editor was leaving, I set about polishing that story like I had never polished one before. Not wanting to wait too long, I sent it back only three days later, and was rewarded when a check for \$330 arrived in my mailbox. Finally, I was a professional science fiction writer. Better yet, "Duty, Honor, Planet" was selected as the cover story in the April 1979 issue! Not only had I sold a story to my favorite magazine, but I had also made the cover the first time out!

Over the next year or two I wrote several short stories, novelettes, and novellas. They were published primarily in *Analog* by Stan Schmidt, but also in *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine* and *Amazing Stories*. In the course of writing these stories, I managed to write three stories, all with the same character and in chronological order. When I added up the total words, I discovered that I was five-sixths of the way to having a novel!

So, after writing two transition sections and cleaning up my three stories, I collected them into a 62,000-word manuscript and began looking for an agent to help me peddle my first novel. I found an agent who specialized in *Analog* writers, and after a few months of suspense, he managed to place it at the first publisher he tried – Del Rey Books, the science fiction imprint of Random House. For those who are unfamiliar with the science fiction market, in the early 1980s Del Rey was the powerhouse publisher in science fiction. It was made so by a powerhouse editor, Judy-Lynn Del Rey.

When I sold my first novel to Del Rey, they asked for a proposal for a second novel. Not long after that, my company sent me to New York on business, so I made it a point to take a day off to go into New York City to meet my new agent, who in turn made arrangements for us to have lunch with Judy-Lynn Del Rey. The date was April 27, 1981. My agent and I talked about writing for an hour or so before it came time to meet

Judy-Lynn for lunch. Then we went down to street level and walked a block or so to the restaurant. We arrived early and were seated at the table where we awaited the arrival of the great personage.

As we sat there, I watched the people entering the restaurant and was momentarily startled when a very short woman walked in, accompanied by a youngish bearded man. The woman was abnormally short. In fact, she wasn't just short – she was a dwarf! (I know political correctness requires us to refer to such individuals as “little people,” but I use the term descriptively. Dwarfs are people with normal torsos, but shortened arms and legs, victims of a genetic disorder named achondroplasia.)

As she walked in the door, I remember having a sudden startled thought. Was this the famous Judy-Lynn Del Rey? As she and her companion approached us, the suspicion became a certainty. So I and my agent stood and I was introduced to the acknowledged 800-pound gorilla of the science fiction publishing world, a lady who topped out at slightly less than four feet tall.

The contrast must have been a sight to see. I am on the upper end of the height scale, measuring 6 feet 4 inches in my stocking feet. Yet, despite the disparity in our sizes, there was no mistaking who was top dog at the table. In fact, I was on the low end of the status scale there. I was a soon-to-be published first time author in a field where the other three were seasoned professionals. It was a fairly intimidating moment for me.

I often think back to that first meeting. I had read about Judy-Lynn for years and no one had ever mentioned her height (or lack thereof). Significantly, neither did my agent during that hour we spoke before lunch. I think he wanted to see what the hick from Arizona would do when surprised. He was probably wondering how big a social *faux pas* I would make when I met her. Perhaps he thought I would gawk or say something insensitive. I am happy to say that I was as suave as I could be considering that I was shaking hands with one of the demigods of my universe.

After small talk that went on for half an hour, Judy-Lynn got down to business. She said that she liked my proposal, but wanted to know where the rest of the story was. I asked, “Rest of what story?” “The continuation of this plot,” she replied.

That was my first introduction to the enthusiasm of editors for sequels. As a result of that meeting, I went home and revised my proposal to extend the plot to a second book. A couple of months later, Del Rey Books purchased my second and third books, *Life Probe* and *Procyon's Promise* (both available at Sci Fi – Arizona), as a two book package. Nor was that the last time Del Rey asked me for a sequel. It happened virtually every time I submitted a proposal. My fourth and fifth books were *Antares Dawn* and *Antares Passage*, also sold as a two-book package. From these experiences, I formulated McCollum's Law of Sequels: *The editor isn't happy until he or she has the writer signed up to do a dozen follow-on books to the one book the writer really wants to write.*

That, then is our subject for this month. The natural dynamic tension between editors and writers when it comes to the subject of extending a story beyond what the writer originally intended, and some of the difficulties encountered when the writer succumbs to the editor's wishes.

Sequels and Series

If you want to know what it is that drives sequels and series, you need only look as far as your own psyche. We've all had the experience of reading a book or seeing a movie that we thought was extremely good. We were captivated by the twists and turns of the plot, excited as events built to a climax, then lulled into a comfortable contentment as the author wended his way to the final dénouement. We felt good as we scanned through the final two words in any book — "The End." We closed the book, placed it on the nightstand, and then were suddenly overcome with a desire to know more about these fictional people for whom we felt so much empathy.

"So the knight rescued the princess and slew the dragon. What happened next?" we demand. And in so demanding, we set ourselves up for disappointment. Remember the cardinal rule of fiction: FICTION IS ABOUT CONFLICT! The reason we, the readers, feel so good about a plot is because having placed his heroes on the horns of a dilemma, the writer has successfully gotten them off again. That delicious feeling of well being comes from having all the conflicts resolved to our satisfaction. If the writer is going to write a sequel to the book we love so, then he must once again place our heroes in danger. They must have new problems to overcome, a different dilemma to solve, even more evil villains with which to contend! Thus, the first thing a writer does when he or she starts a second book in a series is to destroy the comfortable feeling with which we readers were left at the end of the first book. That optimistic feeling the writer worked so hard to instill is the first casualty of the new adventure. Suddenly, we are again afraid for those with whom we have come to identify. If the second book is to be any good, all of that mental anguish we invested in the first book must begin anew. There is no rest for the wicked, or for the protagonists of fictional series. To rest is to become boring, and we writers can never allow that to happen.

As we have discussed previously, writing is essentially the art of brainwashing our readers and manipulating their glandular system without their knowledge (or possibly, their consent). We are essentially in the business of dealing in a highly addictive drug called "adrenaline." The whole purpose of fiction writing is to stimulate the adrenal glands (located on top of the kidneys) to release adrenaline and related hormones into the body. Just a little at first, then more and more, until by the time the reader reaches the climax of the story, their bloodstream is so filled with this highly addictive hormone that they are practically overdosing. That comfortable, satiated feeling the reader experiences when they finish a good book is the lassitude that follows an adrenaline high.

Unfortunately, like every other drug dealer, we are faced with the problem that the body tends to build up a tolerance for our particular narcotic of choice. Having excited the adrenal gland once with a particular plot, the human body refuses to react as strongly to that same plot again. To get the same reaction, we must increase the stimulus in the next book. The dangers must be greater, the villains more villainous, the consequences of failure ever more monstrous.

And having achieved this high standard with the second book, we find that the third must scale even greater ramparts. By the fourth book, the readers have become so jaded that it is virtually impossible to satisfy their craving for a new jolt of adrenaline. And if you drive your series to five, six, seven, or even eight volumes, the chances are

that your readers will have lost their ability to react at all. In other words, any series, if driven far enough, will fail to meet the readers' needs and will be greeted not with excitement, but rather with a feeling of disappointment, a feeling that will surely spill over to your other books.

To illustrate the point, let us consider the most successful movie series of all time: *Star Wars*. The first *Star Wars* movie in 1977 took the new technology of computer-controlled blue screen photography and caused everyone to gasp in awe. You all remember that opening scene where the Star Destroyer seemingly takes forever to appear at the top of the screen. I suspect two-thirds of the audience stopped breathing about halfway through that sequence the first time they saw it. And by the time Luke Skywalker piloted his X-wing fighter down that long artificial canyon at the Death Star's equator, we were all sitting on the edge of our seats cheering him on. Through a combination of new technology and a return to the very basic storytelling of our youth, George Lucas transformed every one of us into a 10-year old child, holding onto our Juju-fruits and staring up at the screen with our mouths open.

The second *Star Wars* movie, *The Empire Strikes Back*, was met with unbelievable anticipation in 1980. My wife and I, with our two small children at the time, spent more than four hours waiting in the hot Arizona sun in June to see that movie. I think it was 112 degrees that day. We waited patiently in a line that wrapped completely around the Cine Capri Theater in Phoenix. In fact, it wrapped twice around the theater. And after more than two hours in the hot sun, we were ushered into the hot lobby, where we stood packed together for another two hours (through one complete showing of the movie) before they let us into the theater. The air conditioning in the lobby had never been designed to handle the load. Needless to say, after all of the physical discomfort, I was ready to see that movie. In fact, by the time we took our seats, I had so much pain and suffering invested that I was ready to give it rave reviews even before that hokey scrolling text began advancing toward infinity on the screen.

Yet, despite my willingness to enjoy, I found the movie a disappointment. One reason, of course, is that they left Han Solo frozen in carbonite at the end, and I would have to wait nearly three years to figure out if he would get out of it. However, my disappointment also stemmed from the fact that by that time, I had become used to the new standard for special effects. Don't get me wrong, the special effects in *The Empire Strikes Back* were far better than those in *Star Wars*. They had to be, considering the money that was poured into them. The problem was that I had come to take such lavish special effects for granted by that time. They no longer excited me like the first movie had. About the only thing astonishing about *The Empire Strikes Back* was Yoda, who really did look more animated than some of the human actors.

The third *Star Wars* movie, *Return of the Jedi*, was a major disappointment. True, there is that scene where the emperor's ship arrives at the new Death Star, a scene in which there must have been a hundred ships on the screen. Old hat! Nothing really new about that was there? Then there was the way they made Han Solo look like a buffoon, which I thought was both unkind and off-putting.

So, having discovered a machine that literally printed money, George Lucas decided to keep that machine operating by going again and again to the *Star Wars* universe. His efforts were richly rewarded, but he also ran into the Law of Diminishing Returns. Each of the *Star Wars* movies was less successful than the one that preceded it.

Each time he took us to the well, he had to work a little harder to make us drink from his dipper.

The last movie of the original *Star Wars Trilogy* was released in 1983, and then all three were re-released in 2000, in time for the prequel, *Star Wars, Episode I* and a few years later, *Episode II*. It had been a full generation since *Star Wars* burst upon us, and George Lucas's money machine continued pumping out the cash as he continued expanding his series. With a completely new audience having come of age in the interim, it seemed entirely possible that he could continue the series as long as he lived. However, despite their technical mastery, the prequels were disappointing and the final movie in the first trilogy, *Episode III*, is liable to kill the series for all time. That is because George Lucas wrote himself into a corner. By starting the series in the middle, he set up some events that he could not change. The hero becomes Darth Vader, the princess dies, and all of those cute little Jedi students are massacred (although off screen). This is likely to have put many of his fans off their feed, although some people liked it. Still, the *Star Wars* saga is, in my opinion, a classic example of pushing a story too far.

Star Wars is also a prime example of why producers and editors like sequels and series. If the first movie or book in a series is even moderately successful, then the follow-on works have a ready-made audience. The number of moviegoers who buy tickets may not be overwhelming, nor the number of readers who buy books. However, at least the sales projections start out higher than zero, which is where any standalone work begins life. Sequels are therefore better bets for the producers and publishers' bottom lines than are individual movies or books.

That seems reasonable enough. So why don't authors like them?

The Difficulties Inherent in Writing Sequels

I can't speak for all authors, but I don't like sequels for the simple reason that they are hard to write. In fact, they are much harder to write than are original works. Part of the reason for this is the increasing level of everything required for each succeeding book to succeed. The readers have an increasing level of expectation from book to book, a level the writer must meet to satisfy them. If your hero fought off a dozen marauders in the first book, he must perform the same feat against a hundred in the second. Go on long enough, and he will have to fight the entire evil empire single-handed, while the heroine drapes herself inconveniently over his good sword arm. Unless you are very careful in this escalating "arms race" with the readers, excitement eventually turns into disbelief when you exceed their level of willingness to suspend belief.

There are also some practical problems with writing sequels, problems that are essentially structural in nature. They present the writer with a series of difficulties that are not unlike tiptoeing through a minefield. Navigate the field successfully, and you will have a sequel even better than the original. Don't navigate it successfully, and all you will succeed in doing is blow your foot off.

How Do You Bring the Reader Up To Speed without Killing the Plot?

A sequel is a continuation of an existing story — by definition! That means that the writer has an extra burden when starting to write a sequel. For any story it is necessary to introduce the characters, set up the situation, and get on with the plot. This is as true of sequels as any other kind of writing. However, since your sequel is a continuation, you also have to explain, however briefly, what has gone before. And you must do it while not slowing down the plot.

This is much more difficult than it first appears. That is because the techniques for reminding the readers of what has gone before are somewhat limited. You can always have one of the characters recount what has happened, something of the “You remember last year when we fought the Indians on snow shoes...” approach. The only problem with this technique is that few things will kill your story faster than having one character tell another something that both of them already know. The technique is as hackneyed and amateurish as any in writing and the moment an editor sees it in your manuscript; he or she will probably stop reading.

There is another technique that is both more straightforward and effective than having two characters reminisce. That is the technique used in the *Star Wars* movies discussed earlier. If you want your readers to know what happened in the first book (or the first three books, for that matter), write an introduction that includes a synopsis of the plot-up-to-now. You can, of course, do the synopsis straight; or else you can disguise it. Personally, I like the fine old science fiction technique of quoting from an article in a futuristic make-believe Encyclopedia Galactica (just as Isaac Asimov used in his *Foundation* series). If you are a contemporary writer, then you can't use a futuristic encyclopedia as your shell. However, quoted news accounts or possibly a scholarly paper can get the information across just as well. Quoting speeches by fictional politicians is also an interesting way to get the background narrative out of the way. And if these don't seem natural, just tell them in your own words.

When using the “just tell them in the introduction” technique, you need to end your introduction with a bit of whimsy, irony, or suspense. In this way your intro not only orients the readers, it also acts as a “narrative hook,” a passage that piques the readers' interest and drags them into the story.

Then, of course, there are the more subtle techniques where you periodically drop hints to past events into the new narration. Possibly something triggers the memory of a character, who has a flashback to the previous story's events; or else you merely end a scene and then insert a short passage recounting events. Such “spliced-in flashbacks” should be short and contain just enough information to satisfy the readers that the character had a life before the start of the current book. Such flashbacks need not recount the previous book in intimate detail (and shouldn't, because you want anyone who hasn't read the book to go out and buy it). All you really need do is satisfy that little voice in the reader's head that keeps asking, “What the hell is going on?” over and over again. Any information beyond the point where the voice is quieted is superfluous.

There is another reason why you don't want to go too deeply into events previous to the current story. If you include too much of this stuff, you will load the narrative down with prose that lacks immediacy. Always remember that past narrative does not contribute to dynamic tension. The reason for this is that since the character lived to tell

the tale, no matter how dire the straits in which they found themselves in the previous book, they obviously survived. And knowing that they survived, the reader will not be moved to worry about them.

So make sure if you are going to recount previous events to do so with economy of words and without interrupting the flow of the current narrative. This is difficult to do. I have sometimes had to work for two to three months on a sequel before I thought the plot got off to a fast enough start. In fact, the problem of properly integrating the start of a new plot, the introduction of old characters, and a recounting of previous events is so difficult that many writers choose not to attempt it. Effectively, they assume that the reader is unaware of the previous book(s) in the series and they write each book to stand alone.

There is a name for the type of fiction where every episode is independent. It is called “picaresque,” after picaresque novels like *Don Quixote*. The picaresque form is very popular in primetime television. Each week the hero gets shot, bludgeoned, burned, falls off a tall building, or breaks several bones in his body while attempting defeat the villain. Yet, even when left in traction in a hospital bed at the end of the program, the next week the hero is hale and hearty once more, ready to risk life and limb for what is right and good.

By using this form in which there is no reference to the previous adventures of the hero, authors avoid some of the problems inherent in writing sequels. However, this particular form also limits the dramatic impact of the series. The hero never grows or evolves. Like Marshall Dillon walking the streets of Dodge City each week, he is unchanging and seemingly unable to learn from his mistakes. Given enough repetitions, a picaresque series of books will begin to look mechanical.

The Inherent Disappointment Factor of Sequels

Even if you manage to get your new plot started, your characters described and introduced, and your background laid in, all without causing your plot to come to a screeching halt, you still aren’t out of the woods. There is a psychological problem inherent in writing sequels, something I call the “Inherent Disappointment Factor.” It has to do with the way fiction works and the way in which readers’ brains respond to it. The IDF alone is one of the reasons why I don’t like writing sequels.

The definition of fiction is “someone else having a hard time far away.” If your characters aren’t under stress, you don’t really have a story. I alluded to this earlier. In the first book, you introduced your characters, gave them a problem to solve, and then let them sink up to their necks in quicksand. You then followed their struggles breathlessly as they fought their way out of the trap, then went on to defeat the villains, then live happily ever after.

Except, they didn’t.

The reader, feeling mellow because the adrenaline storm has passed and his or her expectations have been met, decides to read the sequel. The reader goes down to the local bookstore, purchases the sequel, rushes home, opens up the book, begins to read, and discovers that the “happily ever after” couple is back in the soup again. That lifetime of connubial bliss promised at the end of the previous book has not happened. Rather, the hero and heroine are faced with an even bigger problem than the one they overcame

originally. Like Sisyphus condemned to roll a huge stone up a hill for eternity, our protagonists' struggles have not led to happiness, but only to greater danger.

Unfortunately, the requirements of fiction require the writer to disappoint the reader almost on the first page of the following book. Think about it! Your first act in penning the sequel is to dump a large bucket filled with ice water over the readers' heads, the better to interrupt that nice, warm, fuzzy mood you left them in last time. You can't have conflict if the readers are feeling warm and fuzzy, now can you? Let's look at another example from the movies to illustrate the point.

One of the most successful series in recent years has been Bruce Willis's *Die Hard* movies. In the original *Die Hard*, Willis is trapped in a newly completed skyscraper while terrorists hold his estranged wife and a few dozen other innocent people hostage. Naturally, all of the resources of the police are useless against the terrorists and it falls to Willis to defeat them single-handedly. The movie ends with him and his wife reunited and once again in love. Happy ending!

In the second *Die Hard*, Willis is at Dulles International Airport in Washington, D. C., waiting to meet his beloved wife when it is taken over by other terrorists. Once again the authorities are helpless and it falls to Willis's unconventional loaner cop to save the day single-handed. Again! He kills the terrorists and secures the airport, allowing various airliners to land safely just before they run out of fuel. One of the airliners, of course, has Bonnie Bedelia, who plays the wife, onboard. (The big challenge in *Die Hard II* was thinking up a scenario that would have us believe that this could happen to the same man twice in one lifetime. Throughout the movie, Willis and Bedelia keep asking, "Why does this always happen to us?")

Enter *Die Hard III*. Bruce Willis has left the Los Angeles Police Department and returned to New York. Why? Because he and Bonnie Bedelia are now separated. WHAT? After all of that emotion we put into getting these two people back together — TWICE! — They are separated? How the hell did that happen? The answer, of course, is that the separation is necessary to the plot of the third movie, which by design must take place in New York. Still, it leaves a sour taste in the mouth of anyone who has been rooting for these two people. (Actually, *Die Hard III* has a pretty good plot and does a good job of explaining how the Bruce Willis character gets involved with terrorists a third time. I understand they are currently making *Die Hard IV*, and I am fascinated to see how long they will be able to keep this up.)

Note, however, that viewers who care about the couple in these movies begin *Die Hard III* with a feeling of irritation, if not outright anger, at the director and writer. "Why can't they just leave these poor people alone?" we ask in the darkness of the theater as we learn of the separation. The answer, of course, is that there would be no movie if Bruce Willis and Bonnie Bedelia lived happily ever after. Still, that does nothing to soften the blow for moviegoers.

That is what I mean by the Inherent Disappointment Factor of sequels. It is one of the requirements of series fiction that whatever happy situation you left your characters in at the end of the previous book, you will have to quickly undo in your new book. As noted above, having the couple separate or divorce is jarring enough; but what sort of a reaction do you get when you inform your loyal audience that the beautiful young thing they fell in love with has died? Talk about getting started on the wrong foot!

Minor Difficulties with Sequels and Series

The problem of getting the plot restarted while retelling the story is one of the reasons why I don't like sequels. The necessity for disappointing the readers right from the start is another. If you manage to get over these two problems, then there are a number of minor difficulties to be overcome. Chief among these is the ever-decreasing freedom a writer has when writing series literature.

Think about that first book you wrote. You started with a blank paper or screen and the possibilities were endless. Then you began to write, filling in details as you went along. Each of these details aids the readers in orienting themselves and in following the plot. Unfortunately, each detail also acts as another tug at the strings of the writer's corset. Perhaps your heroine is a redhead in the initial book, and a little myopic. These are harmless background details that aid in building verisimilitude. However, once written, they cannot be changed. Through the next eight books of your series, the heroine must be redheaded and myopic.

Such a detail is hardly worth worrying about. However, what if your hero has something wrong with him, something that was necessary to the plot of the first book? Perhaps he has a tendency to be petty and vain. Those tendencies cannot be changed dramatically throughout the series, not if he is going to remain the same character. That isn't to say that the character can't evolve, but wild changes of personality that have not been foreshadowed are forbidden. Whatever defects or capabilities you gave the hero in the first book must continue through the succeeding books, modified only by significant events the character experiences in the series.

Those of you who have followed the adventures of Tom Clancy's "Jack Ryan" through eight or so books will recognize what I am talking about. In *Patriot Games* and *The Hunt for Red October*, Jack Ryan is afraid of flying. Clancy makes a big point of the fear, the result of having had his military career cut short by a helicopter crash on Crete. This little foible is one of the things that make Ryan a fully developed character. Most of us feel a little superior to Ryan because we don't possess the same phobia, and that allows us to identify with him even when he is out doing impossible things. Lately, however, Ryan has been losing his fear of flying. One reason is that most of the plots require him to fly and it would get old if he continued complaining about it, especially since the last two books have him flying around in Air Force One.

The world of Jack Ryan is not our world. While Ronald Reagan was president in Ryan's world, George Bush, Bill Clinton, and Mikhail Gorbachev never existed. It is a world where Charles loved Diana (though neither of them are ever named in *Patriot Games*), and where Denver has been severely damaged by a small nuclear explosion. It is a world in which a Japanese airliner has made a burned-out shell of the United States Capitol and where Ebola virus has laid waste to some percentage of the U. S. population. (It is a world, in other words, that foreshadowed 9/11!)

Each of these details was necessary to spin a rousing yarn in one or more books of this long running series. As each event was inserted into the Clancy mythology, it was there to stay. It is no longer possible for Jack Ryan to visit Denver, for instance, without including a scene showing the ruined Mile-High Stadium in which a 15-kiloton nuclear blast took place. And while this may make little difference to the plot of whatever book Clancy is currently writing, it is a fact that he can neither ignore or reverse. For to do so

will bring thousands of letters from readers writing, “Hey, dummy, don’t you remember that you blew up Denver in *The Sum of All Fears*?”

It is a heavy responsibility we writers take upon ourselves when we volunteer to be the demigods of our particular fictional universes. “... Having writ, the finger moved on...” So it is with us. Having writ our scripture large in Book 3 of our series, we do not have the freedom to rewrite that scripture in Book 5. If five years in the future we discover that one of our old plot devices has become inconvenient, we must live with it. For there is no going back.

That loss of freedom is another reason why I don’t like sequels. I prefer to build my little universes one at a time, making each an individual. Series writing does not give me that freedom.

Conclusion

I began this month’s article with the allegation that my current career as an INTERNET bookseller and publisher is due in part to the fact that I don’t like to write sequels. As noted in the introduction, I had done two two-book series in my career. These were *Life Probe - Procyon’s Promise* and *Antares Dawn - Antares Passage*. I found the second books in these series to be some of the hardest writing I have ever done. Judging from the reaction of readers, however, I believe that I managed to avoid most, if not all, of the pitfalls of sequel writing.

After *Antares Passage*, I concluded that my own interest as a writer lay in writing single works rather than series. Other writers may disagree, but I felt that was the right decision for me at the time. It typically takes me a year to write a book, and therefore, a three-book series required the commitment of a significant portion of my whole writing career. If the series turned out to be successful, then those three years would be well spent. However, if it didn’t, then I would have devoted as much as 10% of my writing life to a flop. I concluded that my chances of being successful lay in attempting to “hit the ball out of the park” every time I came to bat, rather than continuing to write book after book in the same universe using the same characters. It was a decision that I felt very strongly about and one that had consequences.

Because of the economic factors involved in publishing noted previously, my editors did not agree with my approach. They didn’t say that they didn’t agree, mind you; but you could see it in their eyes. They wanted trilogies or more, and when I consistently avoided committing to such, my career with my publisher began to falter. Eventually, they turned down one of my proposals, which broke the option clause in my contract and allowed me to pursue selling my work elsewhere. It was a decision I don’t begrudge them. They had their vision of the future and I had mine. The fact that the two were in conflict is no one’s fault. That’s just the way life is.

As luck would have it, they let my work fall out of print just as the INTERNET, the most efficient means of mass communications ever invented, was coming online. It was one of those confluences of events that makes one believe in fate. So, instead of continuing to pursue selling my work to another publisher, I decided to go into the publishing and book selling business on my own.

And having become a publisher, guess what? I began to write sequels! The first was *Antares Victory*, which I wrote because people kept sending me death threats

(hopefully not serious ones) via email if I didn't finish the story. Then, being a publisher of science fiction, I set off on actually writing a trilogy from scratch. The first book was *Gibraltar Earth*, which has been well received. The sequel to that book was to be *Gibraltar Sun*. However, *Gibraltar Sun* got put off for several years because of *Antares Victory*, not to mention my burgeoning publishing business at Third Millennium Publishing (and writing all of these articles for Sci Fi – Arizona).

About six weeks ago, my agent wanted to know why I wasn't putting out new books. I explained that I was just too busy with my day job and my little publishing empire. He seemed unimpressed.

That call triggered something that every writer needs when writing a book, especially one who is his own publisher. That is an impetus to sit the butt down in the chair and begin! One famous writer (I forget who) once said that writing is easy. You just roll a blank piece of paper into the platen of your typewriter, and stare at it until little droplets of blood pop out on your forehead. The sentiment has not changed in the years since we turned in our typewriters for word processors.

So, having gotten the external kick that I needed, I sat down and began to type. That was six weeks ago. At the moment of this writing, I have written 60,000 words and am about half done. For me, this pace is the equivalent of faster than light travel. I'm not quite sure where I am going, but I am making good time getting there.

So, having spent my writing life fighting the concept of sequels and series, I came around as soon as I became a publisher. I still don't like them, but as the progress on *Gibraltar Sun* indicates, there is something to be said for thinking about a plot for five or six years. When that one is done, probably early in 2006, then I will face the conclusion of the trilogy: *Gibraltar Stars*. Presumably, having written approximately a quarter million words in the Gibraltar universe by that time, I won't need another five or six years to think about it.

Maybe I will be able to just sit down and write it.

The End

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NOVELS

1. Life Probe - ^{US}\$5.00

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.