

My Other Car is Another World: Writing Fiction in the Genres

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Introduction

Let's get to the point: genres are cool and genres make money. Whether it is movies, books or opera, it's the genres that people want to read, watch, write, and be in. Science fiction, fantasy, mystery, horror, romance and all the others get the fame and make the money.

Is that why you should write in them? No. Odds are, *you* will not get the fame and/or money. I cannot promise that, nor do I want to denigrate, at all, "serious" or literary writing. I want to argue instead that, in addition to being (possibly) popular and remunerative, works in the genres can elucidate the human condition as well or better than literary fiction.

Every day, the world gets a little bit closer to the predictions of science fiction, with every new iPhone. Every day we are confronted by mysteries, or face horrible events. The genres can not only *entertain* us, but can also *prepare* us psychologically, emotionally and spiritually for life in a weird, chaotic universe.

This book contains the most important information you will get in the workshop today, and copies of all the worksheets used. This book and what it contains are YOURS, to do with what you please.

Enjoy.

The Story Pattern, or Our Common Vocabulary of Story

Character in a **Situation** has an **Intention**, encounters a **Complication**, faces a **Problem**, tries a **Solution**, the Complication-Problem-Solution pattern repeats X number of times, with the **Stakes** gradually increasing, encounters **Biggest Complication**, which leads to **Biggest Problem**, gets forced into **Choice/Sacrifice**, **Resolution** of Intention.

The **Character**, also called the Protagonist or Protag, is the main actor in a story and probably its Point-of-View character, whether First or Third Person. Example: Bucky Sample, plucky Space Pilot.

Situation refers to the world and/or circumstances of Protag. Where, when and what. Example: Behind the controls of the *Eon Hawk* in the 25th and a half century.

Intention refers to Protag's wants or needs, her mission or quest. In a short story, this is usually a single and simple desire. Example: Fly her space craft through the asteroid belt, sans death, in order to deliver smuggled goods and make a huge profit.

Complication refers to a hindrance, problem, roadblock, calamity or some opposition that gets in the way of Protag fulfilling her Intention. Example: The scientifically unlikely asteroids swirling around the ship, and the Space Patrol that is pursuing Bucky for back taxes.

Problem refers to the situation created by the Complication: Protag must find a way around the roadblock, and tries to solve it according to her world and resources. Example: Bucky must dodge the asteroids *and* the Space Patrol.

Solution refers to Protag's *action* taken to solve her Problem and continue progressing towards her Intention. Usually only partly successful, can and often does lead to further Complications. Example: Through some fancy trick flying, Bucky causes the ships pursuing her to crash into some asteroids even as she escapes the field. BUT, one pursuer escapes and follows her, now with doubled desire to catch her, after the death of his comrades.

Stakes refers to what stands to be gained or lost by Protag. Example: At first, it was just Bucky's pay day at stake, *now*, after Complications, it's her freedom and maybe her life at stake.

Biggest Complication and **Biggest Problem** refer to the climax or point of greatest stakes and danger for the Protag and her Intention. The point beyond which everything is different, and the Protag is significantly and maybe permanently changed. Example: Bucky is cornered and caught by the Space Patrolman, and must stand her ground and win or be arrested (or killed).

Choice/Sacrifice refers to the fact that there is no flawless victory. Protag must make a difficult choice or give up something important to solve her Biggest Problem. Example: Bucky fights, but must blow up her own ship (while escaping) to kill the Patrolman. She succeeds, but might not survive.

Resolution refers to the settling of accounts for Protag: does she get her Intention, and how is she different for the experience? Example: She lives, and eventually makes her big pay day, but has a permanent injury that puts in doubt whether she can continue as a Space Pilot. What lies ahead for Bucky?

The Theory Section: Genre Fictions, How Do They Work?

Genre fiction is any story which depends for its characters, plot and meaning on being set in an *alternate world*, or “altworld.” An altworld is a story setting that is subtly or profoundly different from the everyday world we live in and in which literary fiction is set. Different genres have different kinds of alternatives, but none of them is set perfectly within the world we know. Something is always, ever so slightly at least, *off*. Genre fiction, relative to litfic, is *setting and plot driven*. And THAT IS OKAY. GF can be as powerful, meaningful and just plain GOOD as litfic, if not more so, because unlike litfic, which dwells in what we already know or can discover in ourselves, GF confronts a truth we all know about the world, if we dare admit it: the world is *largely unknown, maybe unknowable, and always chaotically changing*. In other words, the world is always in the process of *becoming alternate*, and GF, at its best, helps us process that fact.

To get more specific and technical: aside from being set in an altworld, genre writing is also distinguished from litfic by its possession of what I call a *concern*. A concern is the type of interest that the genre takes in what happens or exists in the plot and/or world of the story (in GF these story elements are often very close to each other). This interest determines what the story is about and shapes the story’s action and themes. Each of the four genres I will talk about today has a different concern.

In Science Fiction the concern is *Consequences*, namely the consequences for human life of being in a specific type of altworld in which anything can be different except the laws of physics and logic, *but* in which those laws may be drastically bent, *if* the author pays lip service to them. The only thing you cannot do is *ignore* the Laws. Sci-fi cares about the *effects of difference* on the world and people. However, people often get very confused about sci-fi, because they think its concern is with *mechanism*, or *how or why* the world is different. In other words, they think sci-fi is *about* the future, or starships, or aliens, or time travel. Those things are merely *means to an end*: they get you to a *difference*, and whether the author bothers to explain the means to the difference or not, the real question is “here’s the difference, *what happens now?*” Example: The Leftovers.

In Fantasy the concern is *Values*, or what human beings hold to be right, wrong, true or important, and these values are illustrated against the backdrop of a world usually quite different from ours, one in which certain fundamental rules, namely those of physics, are suspended, while certain others, mainly logic, are upheld. In other words, something like *magic* exists, and this magic can do whatever is necessary to explore the values at hand. The point of a fantasy story is to show that no matter how different the world is, human values like love, friendship, honor, courage, faith, and hope are still in charge. Example: Lord of the Rings.

In Mystery the concern is *Justice and Order*. A mystery story may not seem at first glance to be set in an altworld, like sci-fi and fantasy obviously are, because usually nothing that is impossible or improbable happens or exists, and the setting looks and feels very much like the present day (or perhaps past decades) on planet Earth as we know it. But I maintain that such stories are in fact set in a *very* different world, because in mystery the crime is almost always solved, the bad guys punished, and order is restored. Mystery takes place in a world in which justice and order are *always* served in the end, however hard boiled and gritty it might be, which is very much unlike our own world. We don’t have Sherlock Holmes or Sam Spade or Adrian Monk running around

catching the really ingenious bad guys. The point of mystery is for the detective to solve the crime and restore order, and she almost always does, through a process of orderly and dependable logic. Mystery tells us the world is dangerous but ultimately conquerable. Example: Sherlock Holmes.

In Horror the concern is *Limitation*. You might have expected me to say fear, but fear is the byproduct in a horror setting of the heroes' having limited time, limited knowledge, limited power, limited life, limited options, limited light, etc. In a horror altworld, something has been shrunk and confined, and this produces danger and fear, which the characters, at least a few of them, anyway, will nonetheless survive to conquer in the end. Usually. Often this limitation has a supernatural cause, because supernatural power is an obvious limit to our own. Thus horror has much in common with fantasy, but not always. Example: The Saw movies.

And so, in GF, the world, or at least the situation of our heroes, is different than what we know to be true/possible in our world. *Different things* are possible and impossible. GF explores these differences in possibility, hence the name I have given it, the Fictions of Possibility. To write GF, then, we must begin with the creation of an altworld, at least in its broad outlines, before we think of characters or plot (or maybe at the same time):

Example Science Fiction Altworld: What if electricity and electronics had existed in the 1820s, computers had been invented by the 1840s, and the Internet was in existence by 1860? What if Emily Dickinson had been a blogger, and secretly a hacker?

Example Fantasy Altworld: What if magic were real and powerful, but required the use of blood (or, if you think that cliché, another bodily fluid)? Usually the casters' blood, but what if some skillful "blood wizards" could use other people's blood? What if they killed them or farmed them? What if a person (the Protag) had particularly powerful blood, and every wizard wanted it? What if, while fighting desperately for her life, she discovered this strength in herself?

Example Mystery Altworld: What if, at an isolated overlook on Skyline Drive in Shenandoah National Park, the body of a park ranger is discovered, but the only clue is a mutilated copy of Robinson Jeffers' *Dear Judas and Other Poems*? Could it contain the reason for his death?

Example Horror Altworld: What if a poet had to keep writing verse, constantly, because it was the only way of staving off a violent madness that has driven her to gruesomely kill before?

An Overview of the Story Creation Process

What follows is a quick explanation of every step in creating a genre fiction story.

Generation

As I have tried to make clear, the *idea* is everything in GF. Coming up with the how the world will be different, and how this will affect the characters, is the most important and difficult step. But fear not: ideas will come to you unbidden, if you have read GF and want to write it. And there are many techniques you can use to help GF ideas along if they are hesitant. The next section covers these methods.

Planning

Once the idea is in your head, and preferably on paper, it requires a bit of fleshing out. Play with it, explore it, work out its twists and turns. Decide what the story is really *about*. What is the world like, what are its people like, and what are their problems? The Planning section provides you with *genre concern-specific* worksheets to help you develop your bare idea into a workable concept.

Plotting

Now the juices are really flowing, and we are ready to use the Story Pattern to map the story in great, or loose, detail. I am Plotter, not a Pantser, but even if you are a Pantser, an outline can save your story's life. I have abandoned many stories because I started writing in the heat of inspiration, without giving a thought to what happens after this awesome scene I thought up. The story stalled and died, with the characters looking at me like "Okay, what's next? I guess we just go home." Don't send your characters home. PLOT! This section contains the plot worksheet, as well as one to help you get to know your characters.

Drafting

Now comes the part wherein you bleed on the page. How to bleed well.

Revising

The real writing is done during revision. With the story on the page, or at least most of it, you can ask yourself how well it is working, and ask others, and find and fix its problems. Don't forget proofreading.

Polish and Submit! Literary glory achieved!

Idea Generation: Some Exercises in Alternate World Creation

There is no question that a writer dreads more than “Where do you get your ideas from?” We dread it because we don’t really know, and if we did know we’d go back there and stand with our hands out. This question is especially likely to be asked of GF writers, because our ideas are “weird” and “far out” and “crazy.” Are we mentally disturbed? Actually an alien? No. We are tuned into a different wavelength of reality than most, and in truth the ideas usually just pop into our heads, unbidden, and often at inconvenient times. A skillful writer knows how to notice and nurture naturally occurring ideas, using the methods in the next section.

But what if your ideas are few or far between? It happens. Here are a few things you can do to coax GF story ideas into your net:

Newspaper Extrapolation

This classic method was developed by the old time sci-fi writers, like Heinlein and Clarke, back when people took seriously the idea that sci-fi was predicting the future or could do so. As explained earlier, the future is unknowable, and sci-fi isn’t especially interested in it for itself. Setting a story in the future is just a quick and sure way of getting to difference. This method is also not limited to generating sci-fi ideas. You can find stories in newspapers and magazines that also suggest fantasy, mystery and horror stories. Here’s how it works:

Find a newspaper or a magazine with stories about current events. It can be print or online, doesn’t matter. Comb through these stories until you find something interesting, some event or state of affairs that might have or is having interesting implications or consequences. Ask yourself “What will happen if this goes on? In five years? 20? 100 years? A thousand? What will be the effects on how people live and love and die in a future dominated by this? Or what if this stops and never happens again? What would be lost, and how would people deal with it? Alternatively, ask what caused this? What’s the real story here? Is there something mysterious or fantastic or horrible being hidden behind this headline?

Example: Looking on CNN’s website at the time of this writing, I see this: “US Ebola Case: Searching for Contacts.” This easily suggests a horror story about a rapidly spreading horrible disease. But say I wanted to go in more of a fantasy or sci-fi direction. What if, in the very different environment of the United States, the virus mutated radically, and instead of giving people a fatal sickness, it modified them such that they could read thoughts? Or feel all of the sensations/emotions of people around them? I imagine a story, I call it “The Empathy Plague” and I am good to go.

iTunes Shuffle Method

Whereas the previous method creates ideas related to and derived from the real world, this method creates often wild and unexpected connections and leaps, worlds very different, and therefore is best for sci-fi and fantasy stories, but there is no reason it could not work for mystery or horror as well. Go to iTunes, or whatever listing of music you own on whatever device you listen to music on. Get something that you can put on “Shuffle” and shuffle your titles. As random songs play, write down their titles, as many as you like, but between three and five is good for a short story. You are not concerned here with the actual music or songs, just the titles. Look at these words and

phrases and imagine that they are characters, scenes, events, plot elements, settings, etc. Try to tell a story that connects all of these titles into a coherent whole.

Example: I look at the YouTube math rock playlist I am listening to as I write this, and write down the next five titles: “Teleblister,” “Ohmygodiloveyoupleasedontleaveme,” “If I sit still maybe I’ll get out of here,” “Astray Life,” and “Little Bubble, Where are you going?” Meditating on these titles, I imagine an Aldous Huxley-style dystopian future wherein a “teleblister” is a massive globe of televisions, designed to keep the populace entertained and under control. I see a character who wants to break out of his hypnotized life, but his assigned partner begs him not to go. So he waits, hoping to somehow resist the influence of the teleblisters. Suddenly, one of the blisters breaks, possibly due to his resistance. He is able to break free and leave his society, while the others are still helpless, but he faces an uncertain future. I have a pretty complete story idea, generated by random song titles, and it took me about ten minutes.

What’s the Worst Thing/Best Thing That Can Happen?

This method is similar to the first, in that we are taking an event or situation and asking ourselves to speculate about how it could develop, but here we could get the situation from anywhere, not just the news. Events in our lives, or other people’s lives. Things that we dream up. And instead of asking what *might* happen, we assume that the worst (or the best) *will* happen, and ponder what that could be and how characters would deal with it. This works because, as we have seen, stories are built out of a series of complications and problems, and the worse the problem the more story there is. This is especially good if the original event is a positive one: how could (will!) it all go wrong?

Example: Say a likeable and hardworking character wins the lottery and takes a lump sum payment of 100 million dollars. Sure, he has the predictable problem of people coming out of the woodwork claiming to be relatives and asking him for money, but then these people start to be murdered, horribly. Who is doing this? Why? The cops are baffled. Our hero must solve the mystery, and unravel a dark secret from his past, before the people he really cares about die. I call it “The Moocher Murders.”

The Music/Art Method

This method is more free form and less directed than the others, and is for the dreamers in the audience. It calls for you to use your favorite music and/or art to disable the discursive part of the brain and let the unconscious throw up what images it will, and then bring the Ms. Rationality back to make some sense of it, and form them into a story. Simply spend some time listening to your favorite music, or reading your favorite GF, or viewing your favorite art, and let your mind go and see what floats to the surface. Art breeds art. Alternatively, put the music on and start writing the first thing that comes into your head, and let the music influence how and where the story goes.

Example: As I write this, I am listening to the greatest hits of AC/DC. That’s why it rocks so hard.

The Form of an Idea

Say you use one or more of these methods, or ideas just pop into your head and you catch them. What is the *form* of a usable idea, or what do you need to know before you can move to the next step?

Not very much. At a minimum, I start development when I know:

- *Something about the world* (it contains aliens, who just happen to look exactly like dragons)
- *Something about the Protag* (he is a former cop who suspects that the Dragons are secretly evil and out to enslave us)
- *Something about the plot* (he tries to prove this, but he is wrong: the dragons are in fact here to protect us from a much greater danger. They just can't tell us yet. Protag's meddling almost ruins their plan to save us. Almost.)

I don't yet know much about this Protag, the dragons, or the great danger, nor do I have a series of plot points, or any dialogue, or an opening sentence. But I do have what I need to begin to create those things.

Story Planning in Each Genre, with Worksheets!

Now we get genre specific, and develop our ideas, by answering, in writing, the questions on the following worksheets. Each sheet develops your idea from above according to the *concern* of the genre you have chosen for it. Answer each question as fully as you can in a paragraph or two, extrapolating your answers from your story idea.

Science Fiction Story Sheet

How is this world different from our own? By what means (spaceships, the future, etc.) do we get to the difference?

What consequences/problems arise from this difference? For whom? Why?

What particular person does this problem happen to? Detail this person. What's at stake for him/her?

How can you make the problem worse, and worse still? Who benefits?

How, *using the resources of this world*, can the Protag solve his/her problem? How are science/technology involved, if they are?

How does the Antag and/ or the world resist? What resources do they/it have?

How does the conflict come to a head?

Who wins, what does victory mean, how is the Protag and/or the world different?

Fantasy Story Sheet

How is this world different from our own? What “magic” is present?

What values are at stake in this world? Which ones are important/reflected in the nature of the world?

Which character(s) exemplify these values? Why him/her? Do they possess these virtues or will they come to learn them?

What forces oppose these values? Do they represent opposite values?

What must the Protag do to prove/protect his values? What resources does he/she have? Does he/she know how to use them? How does the Protag relate to the world’s “magic”?

How does the Antag resist? What resources are at his/her/its disposal? Which complications do they throw at the Protag? How do they use the “magic”?

How does the conflict come to a head?

What does the Protag sacrifice or put at risk for the values at stake?

How are the values celebrated at the end?

Mystery Story Sheet

How is this world different from our own? How are justice and order exemplified within it? What order prevails the beginning, to be disturbed by our crime?

What is the crime? Who does it affect, both the main victim and the secondary ones? How is it discovered? Where and why does it take place?

Who is guilty? What was their motive? What means do they use to hide/escape from their guilt?

Who is the Order Bringer, what person is charged with solving the crime and restoring order? Detail this person. What resources/abilities do they have? What disadvantages? What's at stake for him/her?

How does the OB work backwards from the crime to the culprit? What red herrings, dead ends, and challenges stand in their way?

How does the Protag solve the crime and point out the guilty?

How are the guilty brought to justice? How do they resist?

What are the lasting consequences of the crime and its solution? Is order really restored?

Horror Story Sheet

How is this world different from our own? How is it more limited?

How do these limits affect people in this world? Whom? Why?

What particular person most suffers from these limit(s)? Detail this person. What's at stake for him/her?

How can you make the problem worse, and worse still? How do the limits restrict the Protag, and how do they struggle against them?

Using their own resources, can the Protag and/or other characters survive this limitation? How many will die?

How do the limitations of the world resist the character's responses?

How does the conflict come to a head?

Who wins, what does victory mean, how is the Protag and/or the world different? Are the limitations finally overcome, or are they waiting to return...?

Star Map and Star Pilot: Using the Story Pattern and Developing Characters

We are almost finished planning, I promise. Hopefully at this point your creative juices are near to boiling and you are ready to begin drafting. Take one last thing with you: a “plot point” or “plot beat” map. On the next page is another worksheet, which gives you space to specifically describe every major move of the plot, using the Story Pattern we learned earlier. Why do you have to do this? Because it will set your mind at ease to know where you are going and how you will get there. You can draft, if you wish, without looking at the story’s Pattern. But it is good to have it there should you get stuck. Come back to this map for direction and fresh inspiration. There is also a worksheet to help you get to know your Protag (and other characters) better. I recommend that both sheets be filled out *before* you begin drafting, but do what works for you.

Plot Worksheet (you may need other sheets of paper, write as much as you want here)

The **Character** _____

is in the **Situation** _____

with the **Intention** to _____

but he/she/it encounters the **Complication** that _____

his/her/its **Problem** is that he/she/it must _____

his/her/its **Solution** is to _____

but he/she/it encounters the **Complication** that _____

His/her/its **Problem** is that he/she/it must _____

His/her/its **Solution** is to _____

With every **CPS Cycle** the **Stakes** increase because _____

Protag faces the **Biggest Complication** when _____

This results in the **Biggest Problem**, that he/she/it must _____

As a result, Protag's **Choice/Sacrifice** is _____

Events reach their **Resolution** when _____

Character Worksheet

How much do you need to know about your characters to portray them as three-dimensional characters in GF? The worksheet below is my answer. **Warning:** Most of this will *not* make it explicitly into the story in the form of telling, but it will influence what you *show* the characters saying and doing, and be their reasons for doing what they do in the plot.

Name (including titles and nicknames): _____

Physical Description:

Detailed: Age _____

Race/Species _____

Eye Color _____

Hair Color/Style _____

Build (Height/Weight) _____

Style of Dress/Equipment _____

Distinguishing Features/Mannerisms _____

“Quick Brush Strokes” Description _____

Origin:

Place and Time Born and Raised _____

Education and Training (degrees/ranks) _____

Formative Experiences _____

Important People, Places and Things: _____

Current Job/Role: _____

Recent Experiences _____

Strengths and Skills: _____

Weaknesses and Ignorances: _____

Secrets: _____

Fears: _____

At His/Her/Its Best: _____

At His/Her/Its Worst: _____

Representative Quote(s): _____

Conflicts:

Internal: _____

External: _____

Some Technical Issues in Each Genre

SF: Bending the Rules Consistently, and Thinking Through the Consequences

If science fiction is about the consequences of difference, and possibly about bending the rules of physics to achieve that difference, how does one do so well and consistently? Because *consistency* is the main rule in sci-fi: you can have almost anything you want happen or be true of the world, but you as the author must have thought out the consequences of and *new rules* of this difference, and apply them evenly. If you seem to be making stuff up as the plot requires, or are ignoring known science for no good reason, or you haven't thought through how your future society would actually work, and why and how it would get that way, your super-smart sci-fi reader will be able to tell this in a minute, and will put your story down. She will then tell folk on the internet how much of a dolt you are.

For example, as far as we know, no matter in this universe can go as fast or faster than the speed of light, at least not without disastrous consequences. Meaning that getting to even the nearest stars with current propulsion technology, or any that is dreamed of by contemporary engineers, will take centuries at least. Fine if you are writing a generation ship story, very difficult if you want to have interstellar government, trade, war, etc. No United Federation of Planets or Galactic Empire. No freaking space pirates. But of course sci-fi stories feature these things all the time, and sci-fi writers have discovered all sorts of clever loopholes in the light speed law, usually involving the starship moving out of this universe and into another place where the speed of light is different or just doesn't apply. Warp drive, hyperspace, the (Insert Your Favorite Name Here) Drive are all examples. And this is just fine. Several of these ideas have just enough remote plausibility, and are such sci-fi staples, that the writer, as long as she is careful, can get away with just showing that they exist, with little to no explanation of how they work. The engine isn't important in most stories, where it takes you is. But care must be taken: if you establish the rule early in your story that your characters' ship can go one light year in a week, you cannot later in the story (without a *very* good reason), have them suddenly go ten light years in a week just because the plot requires them to be present on Delta IV for a big battle.

Countless other examples of this could be given, as well as of things that every sci-fi writer should know about science. There are no big fire balls in space (but things do explode). Humans exposed to vacuum do not explode (but their blood does boil). Characters living on Mars would eventually develop brittle bones and weak muscles from the lower gravity (but future medical treatments could remedy this). Radiation doesn't give you super powers: it causes you to bleed from every orifice, your hair to fall out, and later cancer and birth defects (but maybe Protag has a certain genetic mutation...). Rockets and most other propulsion systems require fuel which must be brought with you at great weight and expense (but look up ramjets). When traveling to another planet, you must know where it is in its orbit, and decelerate as you approach (or you shoot by it like a bullet, if you don't crash). In short, any science you use, get it right; when you make up new science, apply it consistently, and always know who grows the food.

Fantasy: The Laws of Magic, and Why it Has Them

At first glance, magic may seem to be the opposite of sci-fi's rule of consistency. After all, it's freaking *magic*, it has no limits or rules, it can do anything at any time. You want it, there's a

spell for that. But as every serious fantasy writer knows, having something that can do anything or solve any problem with a few mumbled words or hand gestures is a real story tension killer. If your characters can go anywhere and do anything, then they have no problems and no threats, and there is by definition no story. Characters, however powerful they are, must face uncertainty and danger, and they must have to do some hard work. That is why J.K. Rowling put rules on magic in the Harry Potter books, such as the rule that magic cannot create food (Gamp's Law of Elemental Transfiguration). If it could, there'd be no need for work or economics. That's why wizards in D&D have a limited number of spells they can cast per level per day.

All magical systems, to be useful in fiction, must have rules or restrictions, or best yet, they must have a cost. Something real and probably valuable must be given or used up to create the effect, or maybe it costs the magic user something physically or mentally, some damage or fatigue. Maybe your spells require wands, words, movements, material components, or cause pain, fear, memory lost, tiredness, etc. in the caster. The more powerful the effect, the more dear the cost should be. This keeps things from seeming too easy, and creates conflict, tension and danger. The story could simply be about the cost of magic, the things the characters have to do, have, or go through in order to use magic. Maybe magic can only be done by certain objects, people, or creatures. Maybe it requires the drawing of a magic circle, or consorting with dangerous entities. Maybe magic is wild and uncontrollable. Maybe it ages you rapidly or drives you slowly insane. The possibilities are endless, but before you use magic in your story decide what it will cost and what its limitations are.

A Word About Elves

There are many different sub-genres of fantasy: low, urban, high, historical, dark, supernatural, etc. Each tends to have common character types and situations that long ago were clichés. Do you really want to write the billionth diluted version of Tolkien? Must your barbarian look like Conan? Yet another street-smart wizard in a trench coat? Demons again? In fantasy, the options are even broader than in sci-fi, so add some difference to your fantasy. If you want to write epic high fantasy with fighters and wizards and thieves, invent your own races. Don't use elves, dwarves and halflings. Re-imagine sword and sorcery barbarians. Make your city wizard of a non-typical race, gender, class or clothing style. What if the tech level in your fantasy kingdom was not medieval but bronze age? Remember when designing fantasy worlds that what is important is the exploration of values, and that magic can make that happen in any place or world you can imagine. Just about everything has been done to death in fantasy (and, to be fair, in sci-fi as well). Invent a new way for magic to work that has *not* been done before.

Mystery: Starting With the Crime, Laying Crumbs, Red Herrings

Mysteries are by definition about a detective or detectives trying to solve a crime, and "solve" means, usually, discovering the identity of the person or people who committed the crime, and possibly also bringing that person to justice. The story usually begins with either the crime itself happening, or with the crime being discovered, and proceeds to the detectives being called in or otherwise becoming involved, and either the horror and injustice of the crime, or possibly the potential of other crimes being committed, creates tension and drives the detective to solve the crime and makes the reader to want to do so as well. A mystery story is a puzzle which the reader follows the Protag in solving, ideally being just behind or equal with the detective in that process.

Pace and information delivery are the chief challenges here. How does the writer leave enough clues out or discoverable that the detective/reader can follow them in a logical way, without it being too easy or too hard, and in a way that ideally flatters the reader's intelligence and ends with a feeling of intellectual and moral satisfaction at questions being answered and justice being done?

Mystery writers do this in a few ways, and these are techniques that you will definitely want to employ:

First, start with the crime and work backwards, leaving a trail back to the starting conditions, and have your Protag/the reader follow that trail in reverse. Who did the crime to whom, and how exactly did it go down: if it was a murder, and it usually is, what was the weapon, used where and when and why? Why did the killer kill this person? Map it out, with drawings. What signs, that will be found later, did this leave? Footprints? Fingerprints? DNA? A paper trail? Witnesses? A funny chemical odor? A body? What happened after the murder? Where did the killer go and what did they do after the murder? What was their motivation, and who might have known of that motivation? In a mystery, the killer is always intelligent, and a smart person will try to cover his deed and throw the heroes off his trail. How does he try to do this? In what crucial way, discovered by the detective, does this fail?

Make a list of the clues that the detective will find. They should increase in order of difficulty to find and importance as detective gets closer to finding the killer. Also, the killer in mysteries rarely simply leaves the area completely. They stick around to be found, for some reason. What reason, in your case? They *see* the detective closing in on them. Do they *now* try to escape? Do they try to frame someone else?

Also, there are always false clues and dead ends in a mystery. The detective, smart as she is, makes mistakes, gets misled, and goes down blind allies in the course of ultimately discovering who the killer is. These should occur in your CPS Cycle. Have your Protag suspect the wrong person for most the story, and try to prove that this person is guilty (maybe they have an obvious motive and opportunity, but the obvious killer is NEVER the real killer), which almost allows the real killer to escape. Of course, your detective must, in a dramatic moment, realize her mistake and who the true guilty party is.

Horror: Vampire Zombie Demons and Why They Aren't Scary

Horror, like fantasy, tends to deal with a lot of recurring character types and plot situations. How many werewolf, vampire, zombie, ghost, serial killer, demonic possession stories or movies can you name, just off the top of your head? Likely dozens, with new ones coming out every month. Ask yourself honestly: does the world really need another sexy teen vampire fighting zombie hordes between second and third period story? But it's not really that these things are horribly clichéd (they are!). A much bigger problem is they simply aren't scary. No one is scared by a shambling zombie any more. Not true fear. We know somebody will whip out a shotgun or katana and mow them down shortly. I submit to you that such stories are not true horror, because the *limitation* is lacking. We don't believe that the characters (at least not all of them) are really restricted by these creatures; they have become mere physical challenges, as opposed to moral or metaphysical ones. The attraction in a vampire or zombie story is violence or sex, not being

scared. The jump scare is not what I mean by horror. These things are totally cool if that is what you are going for. But if you really want to explore the human condition by exploring its limits, you must, at the very least, introduce a new element to these old types and tropes.

For example, what if your Protag was *not* a swaggering zombie killer, but *the zombie himself*? Imagine a story told from a zombie's limited, dull point of view, describing his hunger for BRAINS!, his attempts to get some, and efforts to overcome the sexy shotgun-and-katana wielders. That would make a fascinating and very original story, and also a disturbing and frightening story, because of the horrible limits put on the main character. The reader will explore what it would be like to have no choice but to attempt to satisfy an unyielding need, before which the shreds of their old humanity cannot stand.

Or what if your vampires were not sexy loners, but the out-in-the-open overlords of society? What if, in day suits, they ran openly controlled government, business and religion, and forced regular humans to serve them as slaves? What if ALL of the traditional ways of killing a vampire were lies created by vampires to mislead you into doing worthless things to try to stop them? What if the characters were struggling against time to find the REAL way to kill the vampires, before they were caught and converted?

You could also create totally new horror ideas, by choosing the thing that matters most to you (or to people in general) and imagining it gone or severely limited. What if smart phones really did kill us, not slowly by cancer, but horribly by torture? What if the problem was not darkness, but too much light? What if night stopped coming, and the world was suffused by a bright glow all the time? Limit your Protag's free will and moral choice, by forcing him to become a serial killer for some reason. Lack of choice, lack of freedom, lack of hope, lack of a sense of what is real and true and right are the truly scary things. Not another demon-possessed zombie vampire. Be scary.

Outline and Draft Your Story, Ask Me Questions!

At this point, I have told you all that I can usefully tell you about *how* to write genre fiction, and you will simply have to *do* it. That is your true teacher. But here are few drafting and story structure tips to help you:

The Beginning: Aside from endings and middles, the beginning of a story is the hardest part. Where should a story begin? There are several standard answers, and they hold true for genre fiction as well. Begin with the Protag, with his or her name in the first few paragraphs. Open with action, with him or her doing something dramatic or exciting, something that reveals to us quickly who they are, where they are, when they are and what they are engaged in. Why can wait, as can detailed descriptions, but we want *a person doing something interesting* in the first 250 words. Place this action as far into the plot as possible, following the old idea of *in media res*. Use dialogue, but probably not as the very first thing in a story. Establish, as quickly as you can, Character, Situation, and Intention, and next introduce the first Complication. Then you are off to the races. Do not begin with a description of the weather or the landscape or the character's favorite hat. Do not begin with a character waking up. Do not begin with the history of the Galactic Empire, fantasy kingdom economics, or the character talking about themselves.

The Middle: The middle of a story stretches from the first Complication to the Choice/ Sacrifice, and should be a tightly focused progression from one plot beat to the next. A common affliction is what is known as "Sagging Middle Syndrome," where a story gets lost in a meandering plot, or slows down and gets deadly dull, or just seems to stop or drag on pointlessly while the author pads out his word count with endless unnecessary descriptions or plot twists that don't lead to anything. Or sometimes writers just stop because they don't know what happens next. The story dies. As we talked about earlier, you can avoid this by having a good plot map and by sticking to it. Of course you can change it as your ideas change in the drafting process, but you never fully disregard it. The tension and the stakes should rise progressively throughout the middle, to explode at the climax.

The End: The ending is the Resolution, and should be about the consequences for the Protag of making the Choice/Sacrifice. What did they have to do or choose or give up in order to solve the Biggest Problem, and how has doing this changed them? In a short story this should be only a few hundred words long, aiming to tie up the plot threads without seeming to slam the book closed on the life of the Protag. How will life be different for her? Avoid twist or surprise endings. Those may have worked back in the day, but contemporary readers won't stand for them. Your ending should seem to be the organic, nay, inevitable outcome, given the character and the plot, and should provide closure without finality. This is best achieved with trail, error, feedback and revision.

Now it is time to write.

Let's Workshop It!

Workshopping Questions

Depending on how much time we have and how people have written their stories, we will either pass around copies for reading or read our stories out loud for group comment and suggestions.

Here are some questions to help you respond to genre fiction stories constructively:

What is the genre of this story? How does that inform your expectations for it? How does this story seem to be using tools of its genre?

How is the world different? Are the differences clear? Are they interesting?

Do we know the main character well enough? Do their intentions and motivations make sense?

Does the story start quickly and hold our interest? Does the CPS cycle run smoothly?

What are the Stakes in this story? Does it make us care?

Is the climax satisfying? Why or why not?

Does the Protag change in a meaningful way?

Does this story leave you thinking and feeling?

If the answer to any of the above is “No....”, explain why you think so and what the writer might be able to do to convert that to a “Yes!”

Publishing in the Genres

Publishing genre fiction is much like publishing litfic: long and hard and discouraging. You have to know what opportunities there are out there, and, having polished your piece to the utmost degree possible, send it out and wait. And get REJECTED. And send it out again...

For short genre fiction, the main publishing possibilities are in genre magazines, such as *Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine*, *Asimov's Science Fiction*, or *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*. For writers of sci-fi, fantasy, and some horror, there is **The Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America**, a professional organization that, among many other services for writers, keeps a list of “professional” or “qualifying” venues, those magazines and publishers that meet SFWA guidelines for qualifying for admission into the SFWA. These are generally the best and most prestigious magazines in the field, whether or not you care to become a member of SWFA. Their list is convenient:

<http://www.sfwaworld.com/about/join-us/sfwaworld-membership-requirements/>

Scroll past the membership requirements till you get to “Qualifying Short Fiction Venues,” and then look up these venues online. Read a few issues, decide if they are likely to publish what you write, follow their writer’s guidelines and send your stuff in. Cross your fingers and/or pray. Meanwhile, work on more stories.

It is more or less a necessity to have several stories in the mags before a genre fiction agent will give you the time of day for a novel manuscript. That’s another workshop. For now, try the mags on this list, as well as general fiction magazines. Rarely, they will take GF.

Here is a list for mystery venues:

<http://www.mysteryreaders.org/period.html>

Here is one for horror:

<http://www.everywritersresource.com/horror-magazines.html>

Good luck.

About the Author

Gary Charles Wilkens received his PhD in Literature/Creative Writing from The University of Southern Mississippi in 2010. Currently an Assistant Professor of English at Norfolk State University in Virginia, he was the winner of the 2006 Texas Review Breakthrough Poetry Prize for his first book, *The Red Light Was My Mind*. His poems have appeared in more than 50 online and print venues, and he has recently published his first science fiction short story.