

The Secrets

A Service Sheet for Writers

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IN THE BEGINNING...

Ah, beginnings. Each writer seems to have a sticking point somewhere. Some folks hate the middle of books. Others can't tie things up. Some folks get lost on the road and others avoid action like the plague. For me, it's the beginning. I find the first 25% of a book to be the toughest to do. I'm introducing characters, starting plots off, doing all that description. I'd almost rather be digging ditches.

I recently begun another kind of job, and this one has been easy. I've become a co-host of the podcast **Dragon Page Cover to Cover**. (www.dragonpage.com) This show has been around for over five years, both on broadcast radio and as a podcast. I've been a guest on it and guest hosted along with Michael R. Mennenga. His previous co-host, Evo Terra, has moved on to other fields, so Michael and I discussed the show and directions for it. In its first

incarnation it covered print media. Since both of us are writers, we decided to expand it to talk not only about books, but about writing itself. After all, if you're going to be interviewing authors, getting their perspective on what they do is really too good to miss. It's been my contention for a long time anyway that most SF readers would love to be writers, and insights from published writers can only help in that regard.

Michael just forwarded to me an email from a young woman who, along with her writing partner, have been working at developing a world in which they want to write stories. Liz notes, "Our major problem is that every time we sit down to work, we end up with another 10 pages worth of ideas and, frankly, we need help getting it pinned down." She notes that they have reams of information, including multiple plotlines and

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genealogies and all that other material that generates a Bible.

Liz asks, "Do you have any suggestions on the best ways to get it together, and how to set the timeline?" That is the sort of question writers hear all the time. It's usually phrased as, "I have a great idea for a story, but I don't know where to start." In that form it's being asked by folks who have not already put in as much work as Liz and her partner.

Ultimately it's not the amount of work that goes on between initial idea and writing, but the *type* of work that takes place. It's also important to remember two bits of wisdom. The first is an old Irish saying, "You don't plow a field by turning it over in your mind." This saying combines with Count von Moltke's comment about warfare: "No plan survives contact with the enemy."

The first thing that must be understood about writing is that all the planning in the world does not get anything *written*. Moreover, as you are writing the story, you will discover things that may call into question a certain amount of the development you've been doing. There are times where I've just frankly forgotten something I considered a *fact* and run with the opposite of it. It worked really well, so that became the truth.

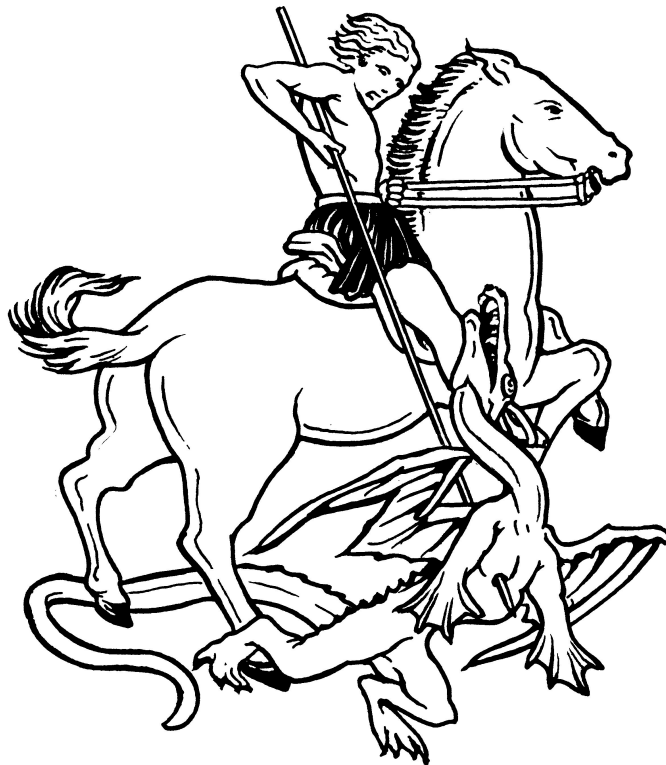
I bring this up at the start of this discussion because it's important to

understand that fact. When I started raising tropical fish, a knowledgeable friend said, "Remember one thing: fish die." When I was tuning a guitar for my niece at Christmas I told her, "Remember one thing: guitar strings break." If you don't allow for these inevitabilities, you just make life harder for yourself than it has to be.

Now we get back to my previous remark about the *type* of work being done. I'm a big proponent of research and development. Creating maps and pantheons and all is very useful. If you were to look back at the World Building series of issues (27-39) you get a sense of the elements that are important and the things it's useful to know about them. It's great to have it all down, but that doesn't make for a story. If a compilation of facts *did* make

for a great story, the *Encyclopedia Britannica* would out-sell Harry Potter.

We know that great stories require two key elements: interesting characters and sharply defined conflicts. Here's where having an encyclopedia can hurt. Chances are, the stories of heroes are already known and have been put down as "Jorl Jarlson rose from humble beginnings in the far north and sailed south as a slave. He won his freedom in the arenas, then fought as a mercenary. Saving General Aurelius at the Battle of Arsenia (CE 381), he was raised to



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lead the General's bodyguards. He killed the assassin sent by Senator Caiteous, further endearing himself to his patron. He was made a full Citizen and, in an unusual move, Aurelius designated the outlander as his heir when he became Emperor (CE 387). Assassins finally killed the Emperor while Jorl was out with a Legion putting down a revolt. Jorl returned to the capital, defeated Caiteous and his cabal, and went on to become the Empire's greatest leader, doubling the size of the Empire during his reign (CE 391-423)"

That's all great stuff, but it provides very little room to develop a story. It could be that Jorl is only intended to be a historical character and never part of the novels, but the era seems to be turbulent, and he is kind of interesting. After all, he's an outlander who rises to become Emperor. He has to learn how to live in the Empire. There are plots and stuff abounding. Just by asking yourself how easily does an outsider become part of a society can provide plenty of ideas for scenes and stories.

With any character, the interesting part is not who he *became*, but *how* he got there. That's the first question to ask: Where does this character's story start? Once you have that, you can catalogue the *types* of roadblocks he'll face later in life. Once you have a list of the *types* you can develop the sorts of characters who will be involved in such roadblocks and you can begin to map those roadblocks against events in the world.

You also, then, have to allow for the repercussions of the victories or setbacks our character suffers. Take the aforementioned Battle of Arsenia. Let's assume the Empire, prior to this, had Legions full of citizens, then others with outland and client-state mercenaries. Never did they allow non-citizens into their legions. This policy of keeping the units "pure" might have led to their downfall.

Given Jorl's heroism, Aurelius might have started to integrate his units, which is what angered the Senate enough to want to kill him.

All of a sudden we have some fairly nasty types of roadblocks and conflicts that will make

the story more interesting. What's really cool is that this sort of racist conflict immediately resonates with readers today, so it can provide an interesting perspective for reflection. But, this trend toward integration is also likely to cause problems in the Empire, and watching society deal with them can make for interesting stories. (**To Kill a Mockingbird**, anyone?)

In developing a world you need to understand that there is two types of knowledge: overt and covert. Now, it may come as a shocker to you, the author, but *covert* information includes things you, yourself, don't know about your world. Impossible, you say! Sorry, happens all the time, and actually makes stories much better for it.

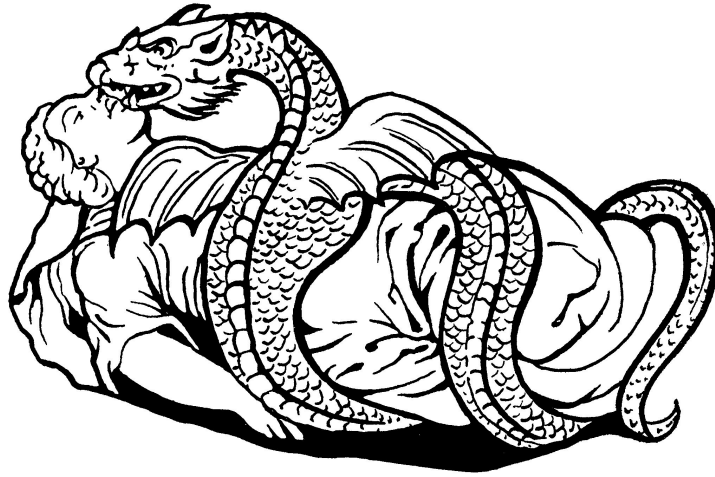


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I'll give you an example from the book I'm working on right now: **The New World**. The world has a fairly conventional creation story. Nessagafel created everything and then created nine other gods as his children. The nine kids got together and killed (or the next nearest equivalent) their father and he's a tad upset about it. He's coming back, all hells are breaking loose, and fun ensues.

That's been my working premise for a couple hundred thousand words now—words already in print. But it occurred to me that it would be cooler if this reality, as presented by Nessagafel, isn't exactly true. The Viruk—a nasty race of creatures—might have actually created Nessagafel in *their* image, not the other way around. Does that mean he's not really a god, or can enough folks thinking about how something must be true might, in fact, make it true? It's an interesting philosophical point and the discussion is a good way to fill some pages. Dealing with the implications of that idea is also the way to get an author to scrap a third of the book.

Could I have decided to reject that premise? Sure, I'm in control of the story (more or less). I could have shut off that entire line of inquiry and not challenged myself with complications. Then again, the complications have grown out of the story—as has the discussion—so they are organic to it. The discussion and the consequences make sense within the context of the story. This monumental a change in things really does muck a lot of stuff up, but it also makes the story that much stronger.



It's learning to go with and explore these things that makes sure your work does not get stale.

For some writers, the very idea of doing a novel is daunting. The refuge of research and development is a very safe one. You do run the hazard of sucking any life out of your story by worrying about every jot and tittle, but almost as easily you are creating an incubator for a lot of good stories.

Those stories need to be explored. Roger Zelazny used to note that when he had an idea for a character, he'd write two scenes. One would be an action scene. The other would be a conversation between that character and another. If he

could pull the duo off, he decided he had enough to start writing a story about the main character.

Test stories or proof of concept stories aren't used a lot, but they can be very useful. When I wanted to write a mystery novel, I developed a couple of characters. I wrote **The Cards Call Themselves** and published the novella in serial form on my website both as practice for the characters and to test the viability of serialization over the net. I got good results for both concepts. While the resulting novel never sold, the development work on the characters has produced a couple other stories that *have* sold, so I'm in the black on that venture.

The key thing about a test story is it gives you a finite and fairly short-term goal. If it doesn't work, tossing away a short story seems much easier than pitching the first half of a novel. Moreover, since short stories

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demand things like character development, it forces you to choose elements of your characters that need to be developed—and I mean more than his needing to find alien technology or a magic doohickey. This is an easy way to get you to think about your characters as a work in progress, even if their life story is written in your notes already.

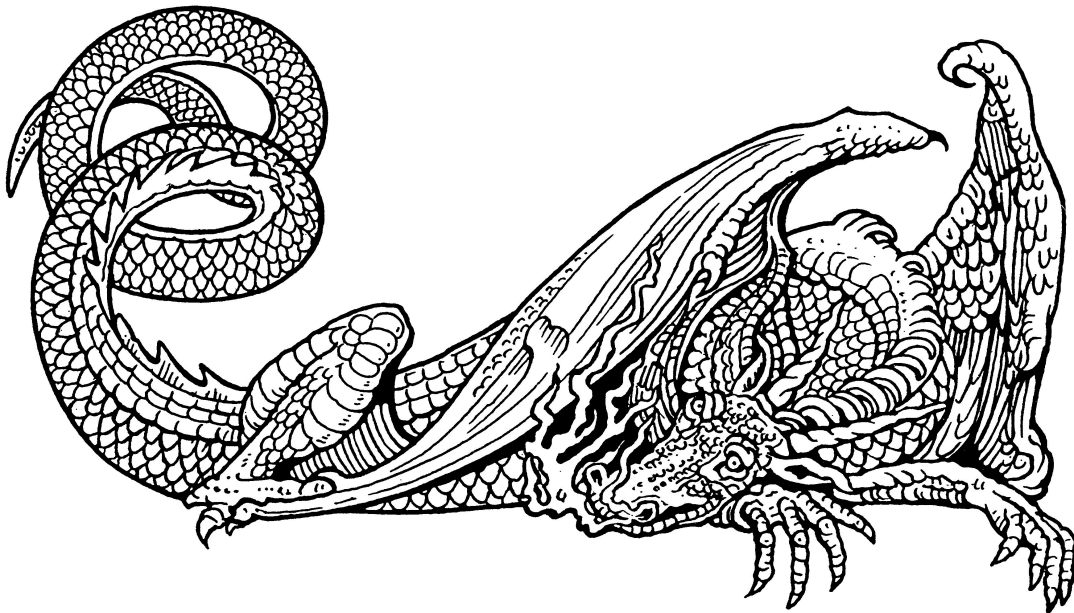
This is about the point where some of you will get the jitters. You've worked a long time on developing a story and what you're reading is "It's all mutable. The best stories change all sorts of bits, so you might as well chuck it all in the rubbish bin." That's not what's being said, and there are a couple important points that will bear this out.

First and foremost, all facts in a fictional setting are a matter of opinion. In **A Secret Atlas** a Viruk tells a man that there are only nine gods. In **Cartomancy** we learn there were ten in the Viruk pantheon, and we also know the Viruk who made the comment was alive in the time before the tenth god was slain. So, was he lying or did he not consider the dead god a god, or did the author make a goof that had to be papered over later? Well, let's agree that as far as Rekarafi was

concerned, a dead god isn't a god, and he's better left unmentioned anyway.

There are countless examples of prequel novels and movies that play havoc with facts presented in other volumes that post-date them. Would it be nice if authors were omniscient and got all their ducks in a row before writing a novel? Sure, but since half the development is done on the fly, there is no row for the ducks in the first place. Moreover, with a little work, papering over inconsistencies is not very hard, and can present lots of opportunities for other cool stuff.

If you've been doing all this development work, your problem is that the changes screw up future stuff. As Liz is doing, if you're working with a partner, it could be that events in your story will screw up things your partner is doing in her story. Coordinating this sort of stuff can be tricky at the best of times. I recall situations where changes I made in the **BattleTech** universe chucked a major monkey-wrench into things others were doing. The fact was that the changes I wanted made for a much hotter story, and we were able to fudge the changes.



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The advantage for doing that comes down to something I like calling *timeline elasticity*. Let's say we take Jorl and because of his story, his reign as emperor isn't as great as it's cracked up to be. Sure, we'll give him the doubling of the empire's size, but it wasn't a golden age. In fact, many pure-bred Imperials resented his being their leader. When he finally died, they took over and completely purged the Empire of his reforms. They may have even carved his face off all statues, changed his name in the histories, credited his good things to others and heaped all manner of slanders on him otherwise. Pay enough bards, burn enough scrolls, and all of a sudden no one remembers him at all, or if they do, it's not in a good light.

How long would that take? In an illiterate society, it might only take a generation. Sure, the unearthing of a cache of coins with Jorl's face on it might raise some questions and, therein, you have the source for conflicts.

Let's also be clear, if overt information can be wrong and supplanted by covert truth, covert information can also be wrong. This would be known as a lie. All it takes is for one character to say to another, "I know you think your father was a peasant, but he was really the King," and some farm boy will launch himself on a quest to become king. And if he succeeds, chances are certain

"secret" archives will be opened and his claim at legitimacy will be proved correct. I have no doubt such a genealogy would be manufactured for Jorl if he proved to be a great emperor, proving he was really of Imperial blood all along.

Ultimately, building a world is to a novel what blueprints are to a working car. There are tons of things you'll never learn about your design until you start testing it, and you don't test it by doing more design and development. You test it by writing stories in it, pure and simple.



The other critical point is this: development work is **not** writing. It's close, and you might be working on some of the skills that a writer needs to perfect, but you're not working on all of them. It's one thing to say two people fell in love, it's another thing entirely to *show* them falling in love. That's far more difficult, and it is your ability to do things like that which will determine the success or failure of your work.

Start with test stories. Do scenes (chapter length, roughly 2500 words). Look at where your characters end up, backtrack to where they start, and write about an incident toward the beginning of their careers. (You don't have to make it an origin story, however.) Get used to working with characters in your world. Learn what they and the story needs, and let that guide you in everything else.