

The *Illuminata*

Delving Deep Into the Worlds of Science Fiction and Fantasy

The Reality of Writing Fantasy (Part I)

I had originally intended to title this article, *Your Series is How Long, Mr. Jordan?!?*, but I realized that it might seem as if I am picking on him, as he has been the recipient of numerous barbed comments on my part. Robert Jordan and his writing are mentioned in several of my articles, both here and elsewhere, and *The Wheel of Time* is currently being dissected book by book for my latest series of reviews; but my feelings toward Jordan are far more positive than negative: part awe-struck reader, part eager student, and part impressed colleague.

The thing that I like the most about Jordan's writing is the depth and detail of his world, and in that he stands in good company. The titles that line the shelves of my fantasy library, and thus have captured my continued interest, contain far more intricate worlds than simple ones. From *The Lord of the Rings* to *Dune* to the *Dragonlance* novels, I see realms that have been carefully designed and developed, sometimes in the space of a few books, sometimes over numerous volumes written by scores of authors. By giving substance to more than just characters, these authors have made their

worlds real, and that helps draw (and hold) a reader's attention.

In this aspect of writing, fantasy authors face the greatest challenges. General fiction takes place in our world, or a world very similar to ours. The rules, places, names, and history are the same, allowing the author to focus on developing the characters and plot. The world has an intrinsic believability (for most readers, at least) because the reader *already lives in it*. This applies to historical fiction and alternate realities as well. In historical fiction, the story is built around the framework of Earth's past;

the same is true of alternative reality, up until the one small difference that makes in an alternate reality, at least. Without the need to develop detailed histories, unique cultures and complex magical systems, a story can be told much more concisely than when those elements must be explained.

Matters get slightly more complicated for science fiction writers, but they still retain some advantages over fantasy authors. By and large, science fiction takes place in our own universe and around our own planet, sometimes a few years in the future (Kim Stanley Robinson's *Mars Trilogy*), sometimes thousands (Asimov's *Foundation Series*). Even in works like Herbert's *Dune*, when Earth is but a distant, barely remembered thing, its history is there, and events need only be written from the present on.

Moreover, science fiction—true science fiction—is devoted (and rightly so!) to science. The rules of physics rarely change—though sometimes they are ignored, and other times circumvented—and the extrapolation of modern biological and chemical hypotheses to the next level is hardly comparable to designing a complex magical system from scratch.

This is not to say that world (galaxy?... universe?) creation does not play a part in most (if not all) science fiction. There are alien species to create, each with its own civilization, history, and culture; splinter groups of humanity; lost colonies; and the ever-popular artificial lifeform. Instead of creating a single continent, science fiction writers must create planets, sometimes hundreds of them. They have the same considerations as fantasy writers, but in some ways, though the scope of their design is greater, their level of detail need not be.

The bulk of most science fiction is in space—on board ships or stations—so not as much background is needed as in a fantasy world. Creating a frog-like species tells a lot about its planet of origin. A few casual comments about geography and social structure, and a little information on culture is sufficient; unless the story actually visits the planet in question, little additional effort need go into designing it. Similarly, knowing that the Kzinti (from the *Man-Kzin Wars*) are a ferocious tiger-like warrior species is enough; one need not have chapters devoted to their hierarchy, evolution, and psychology. Tiger-like says it all.

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RPG Corner (2.4): Detailing Geographic Area

Doug >|< Roper of Epic Gaming

With the rough area for the bulk of your early games in place, it's time to start decorating the set, so to speak. Decisions about plant and animal life, weather patterns, temperature and other details need to be placed in order to make up the surroundings for the characters.

A couple of important things to note:

#1) One should always start several years *before* the events of your game take place. (I like about 100 years worth of time from the moment my history starts to the moment where the characters begin the game. If you want a longer history, just keep going back and back and back. There are methods that can be used to randomly generate historical events, environmental catastrophes, and genealogies, which we'll look at later.) A good GameMaster will not lay down the environment as it appears at the moment the game begins. He should age the environment, and alter it just as the people who live there would. This allows you to create the local history of the place, and if you should desire a particular geographic detail, such as a blighted forest or a massive sinkhole, you can create it and work it into the history of the people who live there, adding detail and richness to the game. These details can eventually turn into whole adventures for characters, and designing those adventures will be much easier if there is a history to them.

And #2): The Rule of Why. As a GameMaster, if you want something in particular to occur in your game, you should ask yourself why it is occurring there. If you can find a simple answer, or even invent a complicated but justifiable reason, do it. If you can justify the presence of this detail to yourself, you will have no problem justifying it to your players. But a Dragon who lives in an abandoned copper mine just outside of a large, populous city will be tough for players to swallow. Would you want to live within spitting distance of a Dragon? So why would anyone else?

Common sense will take you a very, very long way in creating detailed and realistic games and settings, as well as plots. Always ask yourself why something is so, and you will be fine.

First, we needed to set a scale for the test terrain that I created (RPG Corner 2.3). The map, in its natural size (not formatted for printing in the newslet-

ter) is six inches long, and four inches wide. There are 13 elevation levels, starting at sea level, or 0 feet. So how big do I want my peninsula to be? I'd like it to support two communities, far enough away from one another to make a trip between them a special occasion, but not prohibitive, as I do want trade between them. 1:50,000 seems to be a good number to me. One inch on the map equals 50,000 feet of "real" distance, or about ten miles. I'd also like the mountain to be fairly tall, but not monstrous, so the elevation lines will mark a 200-foot rise. This will give me a peak at 2,600 feet above sea level, and making for a fairly steep rise on the east side of the mountain, and a sharp drop-off at the coastline. At this scale, it's easy to set down broad environmental details, and you can really get an idea of where things should go.

When I was setting up my world as a whole, I decided that it would be very earth-like, as in about the same size and the same shape. I also let it have the same tilt, giving my world equivalent seasons and climate regions. Knowing that, and knowing that I want the southern area of the peninsula to be excellent for agriculture, I've placed the piece in a temperate climate zone; mild temperatures in the spring and fall, warm summers with lots of sun, and chilly, but not arctic, winters. There should always be a good amount of rainfall in an area where agriculture is going to take place. Irrigation is a good supplement, but without massive manpower or ingenious inventions, it cannot take the place of rain for watering crops and animals. Since I don't want a huge city with tons of available labor, or too much technology in the area, I have to have the people of this place rely on the rain. I'd like the dominant wind to flow out of the northwest, and regularly bring rain with it. I'm guessing there is between 30 and 35 inches of rainfall, on average, every year.

Rainfall isn't enough though; you must also decide on permanent sources of fresh water. (Unless your world does not feature salt water, or features salt tolerant people and animals.) There are three main sources for fresh water, rivers, lakes, and underground aquifers. (What about springs? Well a spring is what happens when an aquifer breaks through the surface of the land, so it gets classified with the latter category. What about wells? Same deal, when you sink a well, it's to tap an aquifer). These features can occur almost anywhere, except

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KeyCOMmentary Getting There: And Why It Helps To Have An Accomplice

by garrie keyman

Ralph Phillips showed the world that a select group of animated-short writers, directors, producers and artists understood the irrepressible imagination of future SF&F (and other) writers under development. Who, you ask, is Ralph Phillips? Fortunately, you don't have to travel back in time to the (more than comfortably distant) dawn of my youth wherein lie my own Saturday-morning-cartoon-watching days to meet him. My son has met Ralph on present-day TV (Cartoon Network's *The Chuck Jones Show*) thanks to the marketability of endless re-runs and the everlasting appeal of certain cartoon characters.

Ralph Phillips is a little boy bored. Every dull innocuous event in his day – especially at school – becomes fodder for fantastic adventure. Summoned to the blackboard to spell a daunting word, he morphs into a knight to battle tittle-toting T's and jousting J's. In one short, mesmerized by the classroom aquarium, Ralph becomes a daring deep-sea diver rescuing endangered swimmers by confronting a man-eating shark. Always, the voice of reality – the veritable gong of reason – turns out to be his teacher calling his name over and over till he snaps from his daydream. *Ralph? Ralphie? Ralph!*

I could relate to Ralph Phillips because his inner life resembled my own in elementary school. By middle school I discovered I could write entire novels in notebooks as long as I looked up at the teacher from time to time before returning to my adventure with thoughtful expressions as though I were taking notes on whatever had just been said. It was one of the great personal scams of my life (I'll tell ya about the others some time – when no one else is listening).

Now I'm the Ralph Phillips of Homeschool Motherdom (or Motherdumb?) and instead of the teacher's frustrated voice trying to reach me, it's my children's. Consider this typical conversation from our secret family vault of (usually undisclosed) embarrassing moments:

Cooper: (10) "Mom, what's for supper?"
garrie (*): [Stares out kitchen window.]
Cooper: "Mom? Hey Mom? MOM!"
Sully (12): "Kaeli just ate the last roll o' toilet paper."
garrie (**): [Stares out kitchen window.]
Kaeli (5): "Mmfgh whmff ..."
Travis (14): "Mom, this is too much schoolwork!"
garrie: [Oblivious to small earthlings.]
Hoard: "Mom? Hey Mom. MOM!"

*An indistinguishable age permanently fixed at about the same time Jimi Hendrix was playing the last set at Woodstock.

** Still launched on off-world adventure for use as possible future plot line.

While I would be hesitant to cast any of my children as the 'voice of reality,' the veritable 'gong of reason' calling me back from daydreams to get on with the matters of daily living, this is perhaps the role that has befallen my husband, Mike. Though it has taken him years, he has, I must say, risen to the coveted post with considerable grace. He has learned the fine art of safely approaching Ralphie.

Mike: [Comes home from work.] "Mind if I go to firedrill tonight? Y'got anything goin'?"

garrie: [Stares with far-off look in eyes while stirring questionable stove-top concoction commonly referred to as "supper."]

Mike: [Patiently stands without pressing issue.]

garrie: [Firing retros in brain, returning to Earth; 30-second to 60-minute lapse of silence.]

Mike: [Still waiting. Goes into light coma.]

garrie: [No sense of time having passed]
"No. Go ahead 'n go."

This typical exchange is nearly always followed by the now-standard question, "So where were ya?" Early in our marriage I made the mistake of being politely vague: "Oh, just thinkin'," I would mutter. But hey, that took the fun out of it! Now I tell him exactly where I was – every time – no matter how utterly ridiculous it sounds. I tell him who I was with and what we were discussing. If I was eyeing up Han Solo in fishnets – I tell. If I was blasting aliens from strategic positions of defense and saving the planet in the process, he gets that too. I get to be honest, we both get laughs and he gets to know I'm not thinking about another guy – at least not one likely to walk in through the door.

I call this (now pay attention here, cause I know you've been wondering about the title of this column) process of creative daydreaming – this internal invention of and working-out of worlds, characters, plots and resolutions: *Getting There*. My term. Call it what'cha like. But the point is that SF&F writers need space. Mental space. Epics and sagas aren't simply wrung from the mind like so much excess soapy water wrung from the washcloths your kids pretend to use.

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Future Fashions (Part III): Men's Wear

by Terry Crotinger

Let's jump right to this, shall we? The fact is, men's futuristic fashions are just not as noteworthy as the women's category. Why? Blame the media and advertising. More money is spent on the wardrobe for female cast members because often times advertising experts do not feel that men care all that much and that women do. They could be right. You decide.

Men's Wear: Casual Wear

Jumpsuits, jeans, and casual sportswear have replaced the he-man loincloth of earlier book covers for science fiction readers. The fact is that pants, shirts, suits and knock-a-rounds will be standard in the future and as such are not given much treatment in movies or by authors. The professional will continue to look professional in a suit or 'fashionable' jumpsuit. It is the actor that makes the 'look' here, not the clothes. Does that mean women have to try harder to be believable? Most likely. Women in this genre are still background and supporting players, though this is slowly changing...and fodder for another time.

Clean up a man, put on the right clothing for the scene and he is believable. Even in a too tight fitting Buck Rogers type jumpsuit, the lines are clean and crisp. Other than a panty line (sorry, underroos?) showing, a man can pretty much wear anything no matter the girth. It's not fair!

Court and Public Diplomacy

Clothing worn by royalty is manlier, heavier, a little flashier than casual and often dark and militaristic as in the Centuri of *Babylon 5's* court/political formal attire. As in the last several centuries, the hose or leggings are often seen under an elaborate outer coat. Here again, there is not as much deviation from current styles – we see either the variation of the 16th century court or a military style. Surely there are inventive individuals who can provide us with men's wear that at least looks interesting?

Uniforms

The most uniform looking uniform award goes to *Babylon5*. *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* tried a new look and it failed miserably as did the first season of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. The uniforms for men were your basic A-line dress – granted, they were reserved for a lower rank – but officer's uniforms

were only a little better and compared to a bell boy uniform minus the hat. The designers for the series are to be commended, however, that they have tried to go where no designer has gone before to try new looks for the men of the future. With *Next Generation* winning three Emmys for hairstyling and costume design (there were a lot more in other categories) and another four nominations for the same categories, they accomplished quite a bit. It was unfortunate that the first season was a fashion flop.

Fighting Attire

Armor in the form of 'power suites' such as *Power Rangers'* or *Captain Power's* suits tended to be the answer to a man's protection needs. The most 'hunkiest' suit had to be Tank's 'Power Suit' (*Captain Powers*) that turned to boxy armor in a stylish o.d. green camouflage. But the overall winner was, of course, the adaptable Borg with their random frequency shields. *Star Wars* Stormtroopers' all white uniform/armor (with black bodyglove) would not be appropriate for night fighting. (Did you know there are four different types of Stormtroopers?) And, an honorable mention goes to *Starship Troopers* for the futuristic treatment of their fighting attire-realistic and yet stretching reality enough to let us as readers/viewers be intrigued.

I Love A Man In Irons: Jewelry

It seems that when a man puts on an armband he is identified with Kevin Sorbo's *Hercules* – a man of strength and winning valor. These circles of metal, supposedly hard won in battle, if Edgar Rice Burroughs is correct, represents everything from rank to prize money, loosely speaking. A chain around a man's neck (it really is a necklace but no one would admit to it being so) must be large and chunky with a medallion attached or we as viewers reject him as trying to be too he-man convincing. If we see in a close up that peek-a-boo slender chain around a man's neck – barely showing from under his shirt – that is acceptable. But multiple chains on a guy, even in the future, is an unacceptable look. We will want our men to look like men, not Mr. T. But beware. The innocent earring or armband may really be a personal shielding or communication device. Rings, an acceptable male standard, have also been used as a receptacle for poison for centuries. In the future nothing, real or imagined, may be what it seems.

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The Writer's Block: Developing Style

by Charles Gramlich

Style lies in how something is said rather than what is said, and a distinctive writing style will get noticed, though that may not increase your sales. The problem is that a style must come naturally if it is to bring readers to your work instead of driving them away.

Although it is possible to deliberately craft a writing style, such craftings often seem stilted and strained. And they easily degenerate into mannerisms that let the reader see too much of the writer at work. Writing that is consciously "artsy" is more likely to irritate readers and editors than to impress them.

This doesn't mean, however, that a writer's style must be set in concrete as soon as his or her very first story is down on paper. Styles develop and change and it is possible for a writer to direct some of those changes. To see how your style is put together, and to take a step toward gaining control of your own unique voice, try the process of "layering."

The first step in "layering" is to write a story—or a piece of a story—in short, declarative sentences, using mainly nouns and verbs with as few other parts of speech (adjectives, adverbs) as possible. Here's an opening paragraph from such a story:

Jack heard a scream. It came from the house. He ran toward the sound. He drew his pistol. He hoped he wasn't too late.

The bare bones of the story are here, but the "sound" is terrible, like a never changing drumbeat. To break up this staccato quality, step two involves combining some short sentences into longer ones. Recasting a few active sentences as passive ones may also help; this dramatically alters the sound of a tale.

Jack heard a scream from the house and ran toward the sound. His pistol was drawn. He hoped he wasn't too late.

Step three is where you put in a layer of adjectives, adverbs and prepositional phrases to modify the bare framework of your sentences. Don't worry if the modifiers are a little thick at first. Pruning comes later. No editor will see purple prose like:

Jack heard a savage scream from the decrepit old house and ran furiously toward the harrowing sound. His heavy pistol was drawn tight into one massive fist. He hoped he wasn't too late to save an innocent life.

Step four is where a story really becomes your own. This involves putting in details that make the story specific rather than general. Do you want your

character to be named "Jack?" Maybe something else would work better. What kind of scream does the character hear, and does it come from a house or from some other structure? What kind of pistol is he holding? Whose life is he trying to save? Notice the changes made to our sample paragraph this time. They're capitalized.

DRAKE heard a SHRILL scream from the ABANDONED RAILWAY CAR and RACED toward the harrowing sound. His heavy L-FRAME REVOLVER was drawn tight into one WHITE-KNUCKLED fist, AND he PRAYED TO GOD that he wasn't too late to save HIS ONLY SON'S life.

Finally, step five is "pruning." This is where you get rid of any excess modifiers and select only those few details that you want to highlight. It is best here to read sentences out loud while working on them. Strangely, written style is often as much about sound as it is about word choice and syntax. The cadence of the work is important.

Drake heard a shrill scream from the abandoned railway car and raced toward the sound. The L-Frame revolver was heavy and tight in his fist, and he prayed that he wasn't too late to save his only son's life.

"Layering" is not something to use every time you write, but it does demonstrate the way in which a writer's voice is put together—from the inside out. No two people carrying out this exercise would fit their prose together in exactly the same way. That's unique style. And it *will* get your work noticed.

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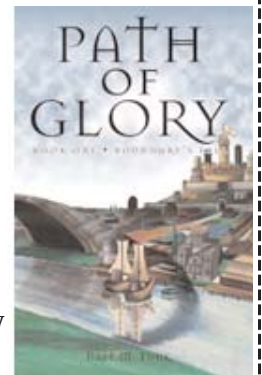
Path of Glory

Book One • Boundary's Fall

by Bret M. Funk

ISBN: 0-9718819-1-X

\$19.95 (US)



'An entertaining epic and a deftly-written saga of hope, determination, and courage.'

– **Midwest Book Review**

"A memorable tale that belongs in most fantasy collections."

– **Library Journal**

"A good start to what should be a great career." – **Scifantastic**

Reviews

Star Wars Episode I: Incredible Crosssections David West Reynolds



Lucasfilm Ltd. 1999
\$19.95 Hardcover, 31 pgs full
ISBN 0-7894-3962-X
Review by garrie keyman

A Vroom With a View

If you've stayed up nights wondering about the inner workings of a Naboo N-1 Starfighter, or even occasionally contemplate the unconventional solid-fuel concentrate slugs that the strange society of the Neimoidian traders use to give their droid starfighters such powerful thrust, you'll want to read *Star Wars Episode I Incredible Cross-Sections* cover-to-cover. This handsome book – deservedly referring to its illustrations as incredible – shows us a vroom with a view; more than fourteen vrooms, in fact.

SW Episode I Incredible Cross-Sections is brought to us by the great people at Dorling Kindersly Publishing – or DK for short – where just about any topic you might think of has already been turned into a beautifully illustrated right-brained adventure in learning. The illustrators for this masterpiece are Hans Jenssen and Richard Chasemore, arguably the two artists with the best job available in that field this side of Alpha Centauri.

Jenssen, who specializes in technical art, especially machines, lives in England but claims to spend his vacations on Tatooine (no accounting for taste in vacation spots) where he has been known to engage in “moderately disreputable pursuits” (he goes all the way to Tatooine for that?). Chasemore has worked as an illustrator in both

the U.S. and Europe on a great variety of projects, one of which was another collaboration with Jenssen: DK's *Star Wars: Incredible Cross Sections* featuring intergalactic vroom-vrooms previously made famous by the vision makers at Lucasfilms. Chasemore says he enjoys “perilous sports involving boards and high velocities (now, maybe *he's the one* who should check-out Tatooine).

Rounding out the gifted team taking us on intricate tours of Gungan Subs, Podracers, Coruscant taxis and Republic Cruisers, is Dr. David West Reynolds who earned his PhD in archeology at the University of Michigan. His background as a lecturer, veteran of field expeditions on three continents and as an author of scientific archeological publications should make one thing perfectly clear: you don't have to be a dullard denizen of the local mall scene to be a StarWars fan. If his background doesn't make it perfectly clear, the intellectual acuity of his copy will.

This must-have addition to the shelf of any die-hard Star Wars fan is equally enjoyable to tot and teen as to tottering sage. It's a picture-book nonpareil or a detailed account of mid-power repulsor-lifts and hydrostatic bubble projector units (if you do more than look at the pictures). It's even a trivia-hunter's true treasure. For instance (be honest now), did you know any of the names of Anakin's co-contenders for the Boonta Eve Podrace? Sure, you say – Sebulba. But anybody knows that! True buffs will want this book so they can win rounds of Star Wars Trivial Pursuit with answers like *Ark “Bumpy” Roose, Teemto Pagalies*, and the ever-impressive *Clegg Holdfast*.

If you like schematics (or even the word *schematics* – it's such a great one, isn't it?) you're going to want to pour over this book like hot fudge on a sundae. Featured is a dual fold-out center page affording a panoramic view of the Trade Federation's Droid Control Ship. The resultant artistry of this and the other detailed drawings was generated when the DK team worked directly with the film production art department at Lucas's Skywalker Ranch, mapping out the anatomy of each craft as it was being created. This book comes from the source, folks: from the source ... of the Force.

My ten-year-old loves taking turns with me reading sections of this book aloud and I can almost see his gray matter expanding (hasn't hurt his imagination too much, either) while we huddle by the lamplight. Only problem I'm left with now is what to do with all these detailed schematics of his own left lying about the house – outlandishly labeled creations from foreign worlds contemplating an invasion of Earth, no doubt. Hmm. Maybe I should call George Lucas.

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Path of Glory

Book One of Boundary's Fall

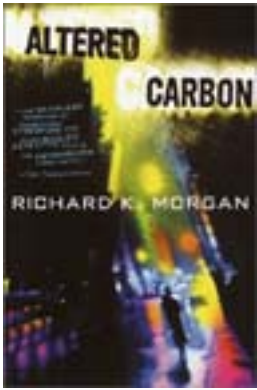
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Reviews

Altered Carbon Richard K. Morgan



Del Rey, Mar 2003
\$13.95, Trade Paper, 384 pp.
ISBN: 0345457684

In the twenty-fifth century, most retired military operatives of the Envoy Corps use their skills to better themselves by committing crime as just about no other market exists for what the learned and applied in the Corps. For instance upon leaving the Envoy Corps, Takeshi Kovacs became a

criminal. However, he was caught and sentenced to hundred years of death for his felonious activities on Harlan's World.

However, Takeshi is more than shocked to awaken on planet Earth, a place he never has been to, well short of the completion of his sentence. Wealthy industrialist Laurens Bancroft can pull strings and does as he needs an outlawed ex military operative to investigate his recent death. The police insist that Bancroft committed suicide, but he insists that is illogical. Why would he blow off a portion of head when he maintains a facility with electronic backups and clones available to replace him in the event he dies? He believes the cops just want to close the case, but Bancroft needs to know who murdered him because the culprit is apt to do him in again.

Left with the operation of sleuthing or completing his sentence, Takeshi investigates the homicide of Bancroft. His inquiries lead him to the lowest dregs of society as much as the self-indulgent upper crust. As he digs deep,

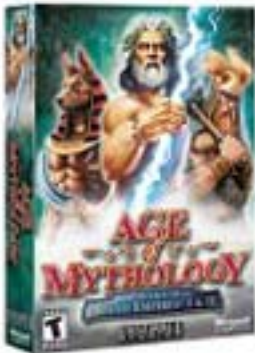
Takeshi also must adjust to his new skin, which if he fails to adapt quickly could mean the nanosecond difference between survival and final death. As the danger personally mounts, Takeshi's previous life returns to haunt him and alter the who-done-it from uncovering a killer to simply staying alive because death this time rings permanently.

ALTERED CARBON is a terrific mixing of an urban noir inside the distant future of a science fiction that will delight readers of both genres. The story line works on multiple levels as, the who-done-it is a delight and the background of the twenty-fifth century cleverly designed by furthering the mystery. However, in the end the main ingredient of this powerful thriller is the ethics issues brilliantly interwoven within the plot so as to not slow the action yet leave readers pondering modern day concerns on cloning, death, and the distribution of wealth/resources.

Takeshi is a tremendous lead protagonist, who serves more as an antihero with a deep morality though he insists on taking care of number one first. His reactions to his own death and the comments of Bancroft about murder are priceless, making him a sure fan favorite. Bancroft is also an intriguing individual as he insures an almost eternal life with his ready personal clone factory. Much of the rest of the cast adds depth either to the era or to a better understanding of either of these two characters, but mostly Takeshi. Audiences of both genres will relish Richard K. Morgan's superb story and demand that he provide future novels in the same time period, but not necessarily the same place or even the same protagonists though a return engagement for Takeshi would be welcomed too.

Age of Mythology

\$34.99



One of the latest installments in the 'Age of Empire' style, real-time games, I had few expectations for Age of Mythology. Yet despite its tried-and-true gaming roots, AoM is a breath of fresh air in an otherwise stagnating game genre.

Among other things, AoM addresses some of the problems associated with its predecessors. The intelligence of the units is (somewhat) improved; though battering rams still tend to rush ahead into the waiting arms of the enemy, ranged units do their best to attack from a distance while infantry moves in for

a quick kill. Controls have been simplified, and the three cultures represented - Norse, Epyptian, and Greek - are sufficiently different to make playing each a new experience, yet similar enough that one need not relearn the whole game in order to enjoy it. To cap off the list of pros, the campaign weaves all three cultures together nicely, allows players to control some fairly famous heroes (Achilles and Odysseus, for example) in some fairly famous battles (the sack of Troy was my favorite!)

But AoM's greatest strength lies in its incorporation of mythological units. Few things brought me greater joy than watching my minotaurs gore the enemies or my phoenix rain fire down from above. The possibilities for expansion are virtually limitless, and the game could easily be adapted to time-honored fantasy series and shows alike.

In short, this game comes highly recommended to all RTS fans.

Reviews

The Fires of Heaven (Wheel of Time, 5) Robert Jordan



Tor, Oct 1994
\$7.99, Mass Market, 989 pages
ISBN: 0812550307

Book five of *The Wheel of Time* is not a beginning, and it's certainly not an end, but it is another strong addition to Jordan's ever-lengthening series. The beginning of *The Fires of Heaven* finds the young hero, Rand al'Thor, the much prophesied and even more

feared Dragon Reborn, in once-abandoned Rhuidean, deep within the Aiel Waste. Once abandoned because his climatic battle with the Forsaken Asmodean in *The Shadow Rising* not only destroyed the wards that kept the city shrouded in fog and mystery, it also created a large freshwater lake in a land where a puddle is a treasure greater than gold and made Rhudidean the Aiel's first habitable city.

Rand is impatient, though, and ready to return to the wetlands, to resume his war against the Shadow. But the Aiel are gathering to recognize him as the *Car'a'carn*, and he needs their loyalty to bring the other nations of man to heel. He is forced to wait, to move slowly, until news that Couladin, an ambitious Aiel and one of Rand's chief enemies, is marching his clan toward the Dragonwall. Desperate to stop Couladin and the Shaido before they can wreak havoc on his home, Rand musters what Aiel he has and begins the long, arduous march.

Meanwhile, along the border of Ghaeldan and Amadicia, the home of the Children of the Light, Nynaeve and Elayne are traveling in secret, hoping to find their way to the gathering of renegade Aes Sedai, those of the sisterhood who refuse to acknowledge Elaida as Amyrlin and who might support Rand as the Dragon Reborn. They have countless adventures—both in the waking world and the World of Dreams—and encounter many interesting strangers, old friends, and new enemies. Forced to hide from both the Forsaken Moghedien and Galad, Elayne's half brother, who wants to send them back to Andor (if he doesn't turn them over to the Whitecloaks first), the duo join a traveling menagerie, encounter Seanchan and Illuminators, and run headfirst into Masema, one time Shienaran soldier, now the fanatic Prophet.

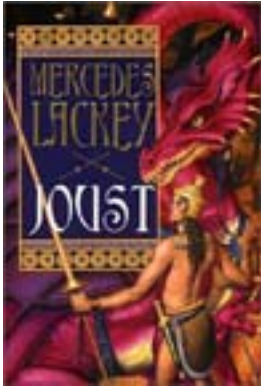
The Fires of Heaven continues the strong tradition set by its predecessors. It is a story of ever-increasing drama, of catastrophic forces gathering for an Age-ending battle between good and evil, and of self exploration, discovery and sacrifice. The series as a whole, and this work in particular, have a number of things in their favor, not the least of which is characterization. The characters of *The Wheel of Time* are complex, some more so than others, but in each and every one of them—including the despicable Forsaken—one can see elements of fear, doubt, and indecision. Few characters are purely good, and few completely evil, but even those rarities are often troubled by their decisions or forced into actions they would not normally countenance. As for the rest, most do not favor the Shadow, but they are caught between their love of the Light and their own, human ambitions. Their struggles—to do what's right, or sometimes, to simply do something—help them to seem more real, and to make Jordan's world seem more believable.

Another of Jordan's strengths is his complexity, though it is a skill that may eventually prove a weakness. His world is amazingly intricate: a dozen or so disparate nations, each with a distinct culture; thousands of tertiary characters, each with an opinion to share; and a history that spans millennia, with hundreds of nations and people dead and gone, but their histories and stories just as real, just as important as any other. The overall effect is the creation of a world so vast, so involved, that a reader cannot help but become enamored with it. But at what price? With each successive book, more of the story is told from the point-of-views of secondary, and even tertiary characters, with the main characters shoved further and further aside. Perrin is barely mentioned in *The Fires of Heaven*, though Mat does get a fair number of pages devoted to him, and the development of his character is well worth it. But with more time devoted to them, tertiary characters become secondary, and secondary primary, until we have a host of characters to identify with and only several hundred pages in which to follow them.

Nevertheless, Jordan's style continues to improve. His prose, though still drawn out in places, is more concise than in the earlier books; and with fewer songs and poems breaking up the text, the overall flow is much improved. Additionally, and perhaps most importantly, the climax is excellently handled. The tension builds steadily throughout the novel, culminating in a dramatic, several-chapter climax that takes place in three nations and two different worlds, and will leave readers surprised, satisfied, and wanting more.

Reviews

Joust Mercedes Lackey



Daw, March 2003
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Review by Harriet Klausner

Though the war between the two kingdoms has been on going for quite awhile, the Tian Empire is winning. The prime reason for their success against their enemy the Altans: they have superior Jousters. These warriors employ dragons as a tool of war with a dexterity that the Altans have failed to match. Thus more than half of what was once the Altan Empire has become occupied by the invading forces of the Tian Empire.

The Tian annexation of Altan territory impacts the lowest levels of life in the conquered land. For instance, Vetch, was once the son of a farmer, but now is a serf considered by the conquerors as status beneath that of a slave. His owner is a nasty person who uses the whip to keep law and order on his property including human fodder like Vetch. However, when his owner whips Vetch in front of the Jouster Ari, the warrior takes the lad away from his cruel master. Ari escorts Vetch to the Jouster compound where he trains the youngster into serving as his dragon boy.

Vetch learns his tasks quite quickly and soon takes full care of Ari's dragon Kashet. He quickly comes to love his charge and has plenty of food, fine shelter and clothing, and a reasonable workload. However, with his stomach

full, Vetch has never forgotten where he comes from or the lack of rights of serfs. He cherishes his host Ari for what he did for him by lifting him out of his forced servitude and Vetch cares for a few other people in the compound, he loathes the Tians and what they have done to his people. He seeks freedom for himself and other Altans and is willing to die for his cause.

Fantasy readers know that vivid exciting tales starring delightful characters are a trademark of Mercedes Lackey as her novels are always among the genre's best. Ms. Lackey introduces a new series with a terrific first installment that captivates readers who know beyond a shadow of doubt that she must have lived in Altan. The picturesque tale provides the audience plenty of tidbits to satisfy a sociologist as to how common people live in the conquered land when to the victors goes the spoils. The talent of Ms. Lackey lies in providing depth, but insuring it remains inside the story line so that nothing interferes with the action.

In spite a powerful story that vividly brings alive this realm, the tale is clearly owned by the hero, a displaced ten-year-old child like many children in crisis zones on earth, is forced to wizen and mature well beyond his age. He recognizes anything else means misery and death. Though his situation has dramatically improved from his serf days, he recognizes he is still an underling to an occupation force and sets goals of freedom for himself and others that readers will admire. Add in his wonderfully warm relationship with Ari's dragon that will appeal to the Pern crowd and his mixed feelings towards his kind Joust owner leading all in all to a powerful opening gamut of what should prove a delightful fantasy series.

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For more information, or for information on submitting a story or poem for consideration, please contact Illuminata@TyrannosaurusPress.com or visit us at: <http://tyrannosauruspress.com/Newsletter/newsletter.html>

Death pulled over near a bright blue home with the name "Kissengyr" on it. He was driving a yellow SUV. Yes, Death drives an SUV. Seems kind of fitting, no? He got out of his car, and walked to the house, and then through the house. I stood there watching him, a luxury not provided to humans; like photosynthesis.

How come I got to see Death? Why is it that I, your humble narrator, was allowed to glimpse his self-centered, egotistic actions? Well, you see, I was his apprentice.

And I know, I know; you're thinking, "Why does Death, who is an eternal being, need an apprentice?" The truth is kind of ridiculous, really. Everyone knows that Death, inherently, can never die, but the bureaucrats and politicians with their fists in the air still shouted, "What if!?" I suppose it would ruffle quite a few feathers if Death had somehow lost his position.

And so I'm Death's apprentice. And I'm going to tell you who I am. My name is Cullur. "So what's a Cullur?" you ask? Why, a Cullur is Death's apprentice, of course.

Angst came up with the name; she thought it suited me.

Which brings me to another point: People think that Death is some kind of black robe wearing, scythe holding bag of bones. The human imagination couldn't be further from the truth. Have you ever seen The Wizard of OZ? He looks a lot like the wizard-fat and small and stumpy and bald. And he drives a yellow SUV.

As for me, well, being his apprentice involved following him around for literally ever and "learning the craft." I couldn't imagine a more boring and repetitive job. The "craft" I was supposed to be so diligently studying goes something like this: Death walks up to someone, puts his stubby little face up to theirs, and whispers, "I know you." That's the sign that they've been 'marked.' He can take them at any time after that, although it's always right afterwards. (Except in a few extreme circumstances, when people become "zombified") After he takes them, he walks away, and the person dies. It's really very over dramatic; he doesn't, in all actuality, need to do any of it. When he was first assigned the job of Death, at the beginning of thought, he was asked what would be the sign that signified someone's impending doom. In all his arrogance, he described the preceding situation, and that was that, it was done.

So that's what he does when he kills someone. It's really pretty repulsive.

Of course, it's not always as easy as just walking up to someone. Sometimes, for instance, a person is driving, or flying, or having sex, or even falling. It gets complicated when someone's falling.

I know, too, that you're thinking, "Well, what about animals? Doesn't Death kill animals?" No, he doesn't. That's someone else's job, but I can't say for sure who. All Death is responsible for is human beings, homo sapiens, people. A lot of you get the ending of a pet's life confused with dying. I'm not sure how that all works, but Death doesn't visit dogs or cats or rabbits, so they may not in fact be dying. I have a strong feeling that a monk named Re-incarnation deals with them. I think I've seen him a couple of times. He's real skinny, has a face like puffer-fish.

I decided to actually do my pseudo-job and followed Death into the bright blue house of the Kissengyrs. When I arrived he was standing over a woman. She was lying on the ground, bleeding from a gunshot wound from the abdomen. Pain was there, like always, poking the wound with his long, stick-like fingers. My boss said, "Hey, Pain! You better get going, this one's mine now!" Pain looked up at him, begrudgingly saying in a Swedish accent, "Alright, alright, do your magic," and disappeared. The woman screamed as Death whispered to her, "I know you...."

Afterwards I walked up to him. He was looking happy with himself, and I said, "Good one, Boss. That went well." He spied an eye at me, and said, "Yes, well, they all go well, Cullur. They always do. She was pretty, don't you think?" I shrugged, scratching my head. "I don't know. I guess."

Time then rewound and stopped, we got into our cars and left to find the next victim. I drive a black 59' Bisquane, by the way. I've always driven a black 59' Bisquane, since the beginning of thought.

I used to be a person, you know. My name was Ian. I died when I was 19, on January the 28th, 2003. I had a tumor in my brain, went in for surgery, and never came out. It was that simple. Pain never had to visit me; I was sleeping like a baby, with my brain showing the world all its little secrets, when Death whispered his oh-so-famous words to me.

Original Fiction

The story of how I became the elusive Cullur goes like this:

I was in that tunnel, that black one, with the light at the end of it. I heard a voice saying, "Come towards the light, Ian, come on." So I did, I mean, wouldn't you? Of course, I thought that God was calling me into the great hereafter that is heaven. It didn't turn out to be so true, though.

When I arrived at the light, I couldn't look at the thing. More than incredibly intense, more than blindingly brilliant, even looking in the vicinity of the thing made me feel so guilty, like I was stealing money out of a church donations bin or something. I stood there, for a while, looking away, my hands clamped tightly on my eyes, wanting to cry.

The voice very softly tisked, "Ian, Ian, Ian. Look at the light, Ian, look straight at it." I didn't. Instead, I said, "Are you God?" and the voice said, "Kinda. I'm a little more than God, Ian. I invented God." I couldn't really understand that, and I felt dirty just hearing it being said, the obvious fact that I couldn't dispute it, couldn't decide to not believe it. It said again, "Look into the light, Ian. You're going to look eventually, you have to. Might as well be now, huh?" I was frightened of the voice. Wouldn't you be? So as I was taking a step back it said, "Takes a step back. It's all going to plan, Ian. It has to."

I still didn't say anything. I just stood, facing away from the light, my hands clamped well and over my eyes, sweating. "Ian! Ian! Ian! Look! Ian! If you don't look I'll doom you to eternal hell! Fire and brimstone! Huh? What do you think of that? Brimstone!" The threat set in and, well, and then I looked.

At first it was just blinding. But more than that it was painful! My head felt as if it were expanding into itself, and retracting in reaction. As if different parts of my brain were exploding and other parts were shriveling up. My temples felt as if they were melting. My tongue disappeared from my senses. My sense of touch, though, told me I was being stabbed with thousands of pins, all going straight through me. I fell apart for a second, in the most literal way possible.

I'm not sure for how long I was like that; dying in a weird, already-dead kind of way. But just when I was sure that this was the doom I'd be facing for the rest of eternity, suddenly everything changed. The light was no longer a vast globule of searing, mind-numbing ether and energy; it was a thing, an actual thing. It took up space, it was. And I saw it then, for the first time, I saw it for the truth.

The voice sighed something of delight, and said, "See, Ian? See? Isn't it fantastic!?" And it truly was.

That thing, that white sphere about the size of a golf ball, which no longer pushed me away with light but instead drew me in with knowledge, that thing was a map. It was a map of all places, of all times, of everything. It was everywhere, everytime. Visually it was just a ball floating at my waist, but if I let my mind into it, it was ALL. Very impressive-the spiritual equivalent of being born.

The voice, obviously knowing that I could stare at the map for the rest of forever and be perfectly content, then said, "This is it. This is all of space. This is all of time. Hello Ian, it's nice to meet you. And since I own and control this, that makes me," then it paused for dramatic effect, "Well That makes me Time-space, doesn't it?"

And that's how I met Time-space. He then went on to explain to me how everything worked, which was really quite simple. Or simplex. He said that to him, all things are now, and all places are here. That time and space are. That neither of them move, that neither of them flow. The past is just as unreal as the future, and one spot is the same as another.

And it's Time-space's job, or being, that controls these things. He makes decisions that change the lives of everyone all the time, constantly. He was doing it even as we spoke. It was a lot to take in, at the time.

After I had spent years with Time-space, after he'd told me everything, all the little details, he told me that I was to be Death's apprentice, whose rank was Cullur. Of course, I asked him why Death needed an apprentice, and he said, "Well, that's kind of complicated." (Like everything else he'd told me hadn't been)

"You see, there are people, or beings, who run this show. I run their show, but I've decided to let them make the big decisions that effect their specific species and planet. They're like a Congress or Parliament. They've gotten together and decided that Death should have an apprentice. They figure that if Death ever goes AWOL then there should at least be someone to take his place until someone can replace him as Death. They then told me to find someone, which I did, and that person is you."

Original Fiction

What can I say? It was quite an honor to be picked, I thought. Especially considering the billions of people that had been looked over for the job. Like the 19 year old I was, I said, "Great! That sounds fine, I'd love to be a part of this in any way I can." I was talking about the map, that ball; it's immensity and it's beauty. Time-space said, "I know. You start, well, always. How about now?"

Floating there in anti-space and anti-time I thought I was taking on the adventure of my lifetime. I really had no idea. I didn't even think about it, just saying, "Okay, okay, let's go!"

And so I began my after-life as Cullur.

I was floating near the beginning of thought, in the Before. It was a vacuum where I was, pulling all things all ways. But before me, a hundred yards or so, was calm lucidity; like water. It was the languid ether of understanding, of intelligence. The thick, eddying, weighty existence of thought. It was something to see.

I looked to my left and noticed another person there in the vacuum of Before. I would soon find out that he was Death, coming straight from being questioned by the Great Parliament of Man, having been told he'd be Death. He noticed me, too. He waved an arm my way and yelled something I couldn't hear. Of course I didn't know who he was, just then. I was expecting Death to be the black-robed, mad man that I was used to seeing in movies. Instead it was this pudgy guy.

We traveled through the threshold, and were pushed out near a cave. It was a weird scene. There were people walking around; big oafish things trying to start a fire. They had broad shoulders, and had hair all about them. They also wore animal skins, and had spears made of wood with rock or bone tips. There were five men, three women, and two children outside the cave. There was also a bright yellow SUV and a 59' Bisquain sitting next to the a tree a little ways away.

Death waddled up to me and held out his hand, saying, "Hello, you must be Cullur. I'm Death. Man, this is pretty strange, huh?" I shook his rounded fingers. "You're Death?"

"Yep."

"Huh. Okay. Well, do your thing and I'll watch you. Okay?" And as I was saying it, two of the men got into a fight. One of them stabbed the other, his spear going through the neck of the other. I then saw Pain for the first time. He had long, blond hair, and looked a good deal disheveled. He was tall, must've been about 6'5 or so and wearing a Members Only jacket from the early 80's that was quite a bit too small for him. He looked rather clownish, to say the least. He drove up in a grey Volkswagen Beetle, parked it, and started poking his fingers into the Neanderthal's wound; I drew back, a little disgusted by it all, as he kept poking and prodding and grinding.

After a while Death looked at me and said, "Okay, I guess this is me!" He walked up to the Neanderthal and whispered into his face. The first really dead human closed his eyes and passed. The others were silent, staring into the fire. Without much time to think it over, suddenly everything stopped and said Time-space said, "Okay, Cullur, that's how it's done, right? Just watch him and see what he does. Now, get into your car and drive it to the next victim." I was surprised and looked around for Time-space, an obviously futile thing to do, and said, "Where is the next victim? How do we know where to go?"

Time-space answered, "Just go to your car and turn on the engine, you'll know what to do." I looked at Death and he seemed to be having his own conversation with someone, waving his arms and talking loudly. When he was done he looked at me and said, "Do you know what's going on?" Shaking my head, I said, "I guess we get in the cars?"

"Yeah, that's what they told me, too", he nodded, thinking for a moment. "Okay, well, why not?" And we both got into our respective vehicles.

When we turned our keys we were in the Before again. We drove, actually drove this time, with purpose, into the liquid-like space before us. Through the threshold there was a woman who'd just been mauled by something. Pain was there again, above the woman. Death looked at him and said, "Hey! I guess we'll probably be seeing a lot of each other, huh?" Pain shook his head yes, saying in a Swedish accent, "Yes, well I suppose so," and drove away; back to the vacuous ether of Before.

Original Fiction

It went on like that for millennia, for seemingly ever. A day in the life of a human was an eternity for me and Death. It's so slow, going from one person to another, killing them, rewinding time and going on again. I'm not sure how he and the others never got bored of their jobs. They always had a smile on their faces, they always seemed happy to go on. It was torture for me, of course. I couldn't stand it. I tried to contact Time-space again and again, but to no avail.

And there was no rest. Death could never rest, not for one moment, not one fraction of a second. It was the same drudging habit since the beginning. I tried to kill myself many times, but of course it never worked, I was always dead.

Death's real name was Harmund Brackus. He was an industrial fan sales-man from Idaho. I met him when he killed himself. That is to say, when he as Death took his life away by whispering, "I know you" to himself. He was the victim of a stray bullet during an armed robbery in Kentucky. It was a simple passing, Pain never even showed up. He was shot in the head. Death was shot in the head.

Which brings me to this: I noticed that near the end of the 20th century, after all of our work together, Death began to get a little bit more despondent. He seemed perhaps a little slower, not so eager to get to the next person, his next victim. I think he was having to kill people he remembered. It must've been hard on him.

Of course, we'd killed people I knew, too. I remember when we took my grandparents, and when we killed a friend of mine who'd died of cancer. But I didn't exactly cry for them when we did it. I mean, I knew that there was an afterlife of some kind, and it didn't so much bother me that they weren't ending. So when Death became so removed around the year of 2001, I took the time to ask him about it.

"What's going on, boss?" He'd just taken the life of an infant and its mother during birth. He looked at me with his usual smile. "I don't know what you're talking about, Cullur." He began to walk towards his SUV, but I grabbed his arm. It was the first time either of us had touched since before we were dead. It shook both of us up.

"What are you doing, Cullur!?" I quickly took my hand away from him. "Sorry. Really, I didn't think. But what I mean is how come you've been so, I don't know, removed these last couple of years?" He knew what I meant; it was obvious. "Listen," he said, "I think we should just get on with it. Okay? I'm the boss here, and we should go." About 1,200 killings later I found out why he'd been so despondent. It was his own death, then.

He saw it all happening. We'd just arrived at the store, drove up and parked in the parking lot like we were alive and well. We got out and he didn't look much different than he had for the last couple of years. When we went inside I was shocked to see him standing there, picking up a case of beer and some beef-jerky.

Time slowed down, as it always did when the passing was going to be quick. I looked at Death, who was standing next to himself. He was crying, I saw, he was actually crying. He wasn't going to do anything! Time slowed down, the bullet exploded from the gun. Time went even slower. That round, grey knife was streaming towards Harmund, every second with less and less speed. I didn't know what to think. Death should have done it by then. And then he should've sat back and watched until the right time and taken the life. But he wasn't moving, he wasn't even reacting.

I began to get nervous, I started sweating. Death started to weep, to really let it out. Time was almost at a stand-still. The bullet was just about inside Harmund and Death hadn't said a damn thing to himself! Out of a lack of anything else to do, I screamed, "Death! Death, what're you doing?! Take him!" Death turned his head and looked at me like it was the first time we'd ever met. He was totally gone, completely dazed. Time was now absolutely stopped, and the scene in front of me was starting to dissolve.

The walls were becoming clear, the ceiling was disappearing. Death started shaking his head, tears rolling down his cheeks. "Death! Do it now!" I could feel the vacuum of Before pulling at us. I was scared. I yelled again, this time because he wouldn't have heard from the noise of space destroying itself. "Death! Goddamn it! Death!" And then, finally, as we were being sucked back, he did it. He looked at himself and whispered, "I know you..."

Time sped up to fit the situation, the store jerked into place, and Harmund Brackus flew backwards. Blood and gristle flew through Death, who slumped down on the floor. Time stopped again and I walked up to him, shaking my head, saying, "What was that?!" I was rather angry with that spherical little hump of man.

"I... I knew it would happen, I guess, I just, you know, you don't expect it, I guess." I put my hand on his shoulder, trying to hold back my anger, and said, "Okay, it's alright. It's done. Let's just keep on going, okay? Let's get back into our cars and go into Before and get the hell out of here."

Original Fiction

We went on. It wasn't anything, really. Death became his old self after that. He was just as cheerful as he was before, just as happy with his job. I was just as bored, too. Just as pain-filled from the screeching habituality of the thing. I think he changed back to his regular self because he had no memory of what he was doing, again. He had no idea what happened after his death, of course. So he was content to kill anybody at anytime. There were small hesitations here and there, when he had to take a family member or a friend, but it was never even close to the breakdown he'd had when he snuffed himself.

He'd just killed an old woman in hospice when everything changed.

We got into our cars and turned on the engines, expecting the great nothingness of Before, like always; but instead of that immediate and recognizable, vacuous anti-space, we drove into the place with the map. We had driven to Time-space. Finally, I thought, After forever I can quit! I can tell Time-space and it'll be done! Things never go as we plan them to, it turns out. That's Time-space's job.

We got out of our cars, Death and his apprentice Cullur. We walked up to the globular map, its radiance emanating with a soothing depth that can only be the knowledge of all things. Time-space spoke up after a while, although I'm not sure how long it really was. In a place where space is nothing and time doesn't flow, one can't really be sure about anything.

"Death, Cullur, we've some things to talk about." I looked at Death, waited for him to say something, but he didn't, he was too transfixed on that globe in front of him. So I decided to go for it, and simply said, "Time-space, I have to talk to you, too. I don't want to do this any more." Silence... I could feel him shake his head, literally feel it. "No, no, no, Cullur. You can't quit. You won't quit. You know well enough that if I say you won't then you won't."

A shot to the heart!

I was, of course, terribly disappointed. I couldn't dispute it, but I also didn't want to believe it. "But, can't you at least make it, I don't know, not so terribly boring for me?"

"Well, it won't be for much longer, Cullur, let me just say that." I thought about it, trying to understand. I figured I was getting a promotion. A promotion! Great! I'll get to actually do something after all this time! It wasn't to be.

"Death", said Time-space, "I wanted to actually tell you this instead of having you figure it out on your own." Death is getting fired! I'm going to be Death! "I'm not firing you, nor am I promoting you, Cullur. Let me just tell you that, well, you have to take all people, Death."

Yeah. That's right. Take all people. Kill all people.

My boss shook his head and looked around saying, "What? All people? How? Who'll be left? Are we gonna get rid of all people? All people?!" I joined in, speaking my mind and saying, "How!? How can we kill all people?! I won't do it! I won't! I'll quit!" Death floated over to me and puffed his fat little chest out. "I'm with Cullur. I refuse to kill all people!"

Time-space sighed. "Okay, listen. All people are going to die. You're going to kill them. All of them. You both know that if I say that all people are dying, then they are. You can't do anything about it, so you may as well be a part of it. Don't make me angry, you two. I rarely get angry, but I doubt you've ever imagined anything like how I can punish you. Physics doesn't apply, and that's all I'm going to say. You WILL be punished if you don't complete the task I'm giving you now."

Death and I harrumphed. He was right, Time-space, I mean, he was right. I spoke first. "Okay. Fine, if it'll get this horrible mess over with, I'll do it."

Death screamed "What!?" and slapped me. In that place it destroyed me. I, or the ethereal me, distorted and my cheek flew backwards while my body stayed in the same place. It was very surreal, to say the least.

The Voice said, "Death, if you do that again I will make you regret it." Yelled again, "No! No, please! I won't!" He was angry, something which should be frightening, but was really just pathetic. He whimpered and whined like a child. "I don't wanna do it. I won't do it. You can't make me." He went on like that until I got in my car, yelling out the window, "Death! Come on, we have work to do!" and revved the engine.

At first it was almost like normal. There were just a few more dead people than usual. But the way they died! My God, it was insane! A disease of some sort, to be sure; but what kind I can't say. Pain seemed to be everywhere, more vigorously poking and grinding than ever before. The suffering was spectacular! Oh, how I pitied the people! So it was immediately obvious when a person was dying from the-end-of-humanity, as Death and I started calling it.

Original Fiction

It was years for us, maybe a month for the living, when Death quit. He absolutely quit. Death quit his job, Death stopped. We'd been in a hospital, where a lot of our time was being spent at that point. We'd been going from one bed to another, taking person after person. There had been tens of millions at that point. Tens of millions! In one month! It never ended! Of course, it never would, until it was over.

We'd taken the lives of 120 people in that hospital alone on that day, that single day of that single hospital. Death was tired, I saw, for the first time ever, Death was tired. He seemed legitimately worn out. Pain was there too, of course, but to our amazement he seemed to be at everyones bedside at once! He was everywhere. I think that he was moving so fast between people that not even Death and I, in our slower time, could see him traveling. Maybe that's what made my boss so tired then, I really can't say.

But he quit. He did quit. After the 120th person, a five year old wearing hospital scrubs, crying his little eyes out, Death looked at me and said, "I quit."

"What!?" I shouted, throwing my arms in the air. "We've only got this last job to do, and then we can rest. I know you're tired; I'm tired, too. All we have to do is this and we'll be done." But my boss, The End of Life, just shook his head, and with glassy eyes said, "I can't be a part of this anymore. I just can't. I won't. I quit."

Pain, at every bedside, looked at us. His long blond hair was over his eyes, it was stuck to his brow by sweat. He had a menacing look on his face, he was furious with the idea. And from fifteen different places, in his slanted Swedish accent, he said, "You can't quit. You're Death. You better not quit."

"I can, and I will, and I am. I quit being Death. My name is Harmund Brackus." And time stood still, and he disappeared. Apparently there was a clause in his contract made with the Great Parliament of Man that if he said his name aloud it would signify the end of his career as Death. I didn't find this out until later, of course, when it finally made sense why Death would need an apprentice, and when people were no more. So right then I was quite beside myself with rage and fear.

I threw my arms in the air, in utter frustration. I looked at Pain, feeling helpless, saying, "What do I do?!" He slighted his eyes and said, "Well, you were here in case Death quit for some reason. I guess you're Death now."

What?!

I couldn't quite realize the idea, and I didn't really want the responsibility, to tell you the truth. It was maddening, all of the sudden, I was weak and lonely and hurt and so scared! "But-but," I stammered, "but I don't know what to do!" We waited, Pain and I, with the living in mid-scream, in mid-hurt, their faces contorted, their arms in mid-thrash and legs in mid-kicks. We waited.

"Of course you do, Cullur." Time-space split open the silence, and his massive presence flooded in through my temples. It threw me back some, and I fell through the bed with the young boy on it. Getting up, He spoke again. "This is the way it's always been. Don't you understand that, Cullur? This is the way it's always been. And it will always be this way. From the moment you were born you had always be the ender of human life, you've been that, and specifically that, since the beginning of thought, you know." Once again, he was right. What could I say? What would you've said? My heart dropped into my stomach; I was pulled by space towards a woman. And this time it was me standing above the victim, looking down. Pain was there, inside of her, pushing his fingers in, pulling at things, working so fast. He looked me in the eyes; he'd started crying and shaking his head. "Please, Cullur, I don't want to do this for much longer..."

I hesitated...

And then I looked at her, and then I whispered into the woman's face.

In a waiting room in Brazil a mother was told her five year old son had just died. She wouldn't believe it. On the bus on the way back to her home, the radio spat out its noise. A man with a British accent was talking about the new disease.

"What we have here is something that cannot be stopped. It simply will not end. In one fortnight five million people have died. Scientists are working on the problem around the clock, around the globe. A group of genetics researchers in Argentina think they may have discovered an integral part of how the new disease works. There also seems to be some promising work being done at MIT in Michigan, and at Oxford. But for now, at least, there seems to be no cure for the rampant disease that the people are now calling the Cullur. I don't know what to say, people. God bless us all."

RPG Corner (con't)

areas that suffer from a lack of precipitation, like deserts. (So what causes deserts? They usually form next to tall mountain ranges, on the side opposite from where the wind hits the mountains, or the leeward side. Tall mountains force warm, moist air high in to the atmosphere. When they are being pushed up, they drop all of the moisture on the mountains, and so have none left for the region just behind them. This is called a rain shadow. Couple that with intense sun and you have a desert. The Sahara is an exception to this, forming from a sudden geological change, but the Mojave Desert in North America, the Gobi Desert in Central Asia, and the Atacama Desert in South America are all examples of rain shadow deserts). The test terrain will include several rivers including a large one that flows from the mountain southward.

Knowing we have plenty of rain, no rain shadows, and several permanent rivers on our test terrain, we can plot where the natural growth vegetation should be. You should take time now to think about what kind of things you want in your world as well; whether you want the same things, or all new plants totally alien to anything on earth. As I've said before, for sanity's sake it is easier to assume that there is mostly the same stuff there as we have here. You can detail the things that are not the same much easier than detailing a planet's worth of stuff, and your players can understand and envision more easily things that they are already familiar with.

Forests tend to form opposite of rain shadows (on the windward side of mountains), or anywhere that gets a good bit of rain or has good proximity to lots of water. Grasslands form on flatter areas that get less rain on average. With our precipitation at 30-35 inches a year on our test terrain, we could conceivably cover the whole area with forests or grassland. I'm leaning toward forests (to create an abundance of building and trade material for settlers) and believe that a single forest will probably cover almost the entire map. Granted this will change as we advance the timetable, and agriculture begins in the south, but for the time being there is only forest.

Before we introduce people to this terrain, we should think about what other animals are here. Firstly, since forests cover the whole map there won't be enormous herds of grazing animals. There isn't enough grass to support them. There would be a ton of small mammals, possibly a handful of large

ones and a rare few extremely large ones. Just a random swath of animals that would be likely is as follows: small and medium sized rodents (mice, squirrels, weasels), birds, deer, mountain lions, wolves, foxes, and bears. Again, just as with special trees or other plant life, you may want to purposefully exclude any or all these types of animals, or include some of your own design. In tight closed ecosystems, the balance is key. Large numbers of predators mean extremely large numbers of prey animals. Keep this in mind if you are planning on having an endless number of wolves threaten your characters. If there are so many wolves, what are they eating, and why are they attacking people? Remembering the Rule of Why is important.

Lastly, you should incorporate any other details you want. I like caves and spelunking, so I've decided to place a series of caves under the mountain. The caves could have been carved by an underground spring that slowly hollowed out parts of the rock, or from an underground river that has since dried up. Other details could be natural elements like a wide scale tree fall, a sinkhole or fissure in the ground, or supernatural elements, such as haunted woods or the presence of a magical creature or creatures.

For more information on different geographical areas, check out this link. It's very basic, but it will give budding designers a good place to begin. <http://www.ucmp.berkeley.edu/glossary/gloss5/biome/index.html>. In the next column, we'll look at introducing people to the mix, how they impact their environment, the stages that they go through on the road to civilization.

KeyCOMMENTary (con't)

I think if I had a point when I started this month's column it had something to do with kids who daydream. Daydreamers are the future creators of the fantasy worlds that you and I will traipse through. Do you really think Irwin Allen paid attention in Geometry? Likely he was already *Lost in Space*, travelling *The Time Tunnel* or on a *Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea*. Not every daydreaming kid has ADD (Already Dead from Dull schoolwork) but a few might have ADHD (Amazingly Diverse Hyperimaginative Daydreams). Maybe we should add Daydreaming 101 to the curriculum.

Sci-Fi Buzz

Movie Releases

Dreamcatcher - March 21st

The Core - March 28th

DVD Releases

Total Recall (SE)

Andromeda V.01.5

Techni Muyo

Gamera

Alien Tracker

Legion of the Dead

Futurama

Space Pirate Mitu - Courting Disa

Lexx Season Four

Ghost Ship

Book Releases

Tatooine Ghost (Star Wars)

Joust - Mercedes Lackey

A Caress of Twilight - Laura Hamilton

Empire From the Ashes - David Weber

X-Men 2

Dragons of a Vanished Moon - Weis & Hickman

Surak's Soul - Dillard

Kushiel's Chosen - Jacqueline Carey

The Moon's Shadow - Catherine Asaro

Conqueror - David Drake

Angelica - Sharon Shin

Altered Carbon - Richard Morgan

Stormrider - David Gemmell

Conventions

March 13th -16th

Sleuthfest 9 (Deerfield Beach, FL)

Cleveland Colossal Convention (Independence, OH)

Enlightenment 6 (Hunt Valley, MD)

Stellarcon 27 (High Point, NC)

Stormie-Con 1 (St. Charles, MO)

Technicon (Blacksburg, VA)

March 19th - 23rd

Aggiecon 34 (College Station, TX)

CoastCon XXVI (Biloxi, MS)

Galacticon (Chattanooga, TN)

Lunacon 2003 (Rye Brook, NY)

March 27th -30th

Gothcon (New Orleans, LA)

Madicon (Harrisonburg, VA)

Star Trek Grand Slam (Pasadena, CA)

Future Fashions (con't)

Summary

Award winning or not, fashion as portrayed by writers/producers is not always well thought out. Don't the people in the future have to use the bathroom? Apparently, once they become public figures, there is no longer any need. When was the last time we saw a zipper in a movie? In the last part of this survey, the need for the mundane will become apparent as we discuss Accessories and Such.

Nominations for the most realistic and functional futuristic attire:

Andromeda

Star Trek

The Matrix

Aliens

Battlefield Earth

Belle of the Ball:

The Children of Dune

Star Wars (Leia's 'slave' outfit does not count.)

Worst Dressed and/or Unbelievable:

Buck Rogers of the 25th Century

Lexx

Jason of Star Command

Spaceballs

Blade Runner

Jason and the Argonauts

Galaxy Quest

Battlestar Galactica

Ark II

Honorable Mention: Fashionable yet believable:

Dinotopia

Starship Troopers

Metropolis (pretty inventive for the 1920's!)

Andromeda Strain

Tron

X-Men

2001: A Space Odyssey

Starman

Babylon 5

Best of both worlds:

Space Academy

Farscape

Stargate

Independence Day

Men In Black (Gotta love a man in a suit!)

Captain Powers and the Soldiers of the Future

Weirder than my cat:

Doctor Who

The Island of Dr. Moreau

Dune

Mars Attacks!

The Nightmare Before Christmas

(Yes, it's animated. So what?)

Reality of Fantasy (con't)

Additionally, mankind expects to find itself in space one day. Only a tiny leap of faith is required to imagine us among the stars, colonizing planets and exploring strange new worlds. And the universe's immensity makes accepting the possibility of alien life equally effortless; those who staunchly refuse to believe are most likely not reading science fiction anyway. These elements make it easier for readers to accept the story and be drawn into it.

But creating a fantasy world, even a simple one, is far more complex. For every detail that is considered, a hundred are not; and while the majority can be overlooked without serious consequence, occasionally one arises that poses a serious threat to the integrity of the world, and thus of the work. A fantasy has to work harder to make a reader believe; accepting a world of dragons and magic, orcs and ogres is a far more difficult because the mind rebels against the possibility instead of embracing it. Each flaw, each unexplainable happenstance makes it harder to immerse in the story, and immersion is necessary to truly enjoy a book.

Fantasies often employ standard races—elves, dwarves, orcs, etc.—to help minimize the amount of background needed. Disregarding occasional differences in culture, elves are long-lived, pointy-eared and arrogant; orcs ugly, dumb, and mean; and the mere thought of a twenty foot dwarf with a penchant for woodworking is enough to send a fantasy reader into fits. Yet these cookie-cutter races tend to get old after a while, and many authors experiment with new formulas. While this creates a host of interesting possibilities, it also tends to increase the length of a work. For a reader to appreciate a new race, time (space, actually) much be given to fleshing out their past, their motivations, and their desires.

The same is true of human kingdoms. Without the advantages of a common history, a fantasy author must show the differences between the nations of man with words. The justification for hatreds, the cultural differences between peoples, the history of each land—histories that sometimes span thousands of years—and the social factors that affect each character can not be explained in a couple of sentences. And the comparisons do not stop at the national level. Differences between commoner and noble, mage and man, man and woman, and a thousand other combinations must be explored to make the world complete; and the more complete the world, the more immersive it becomes.

Moreover, to keep the voice of the work sufficiently 'fantasy,' the author cannot use the descriptive phrases and analogies that other fiction writers—even science

fiction writers—take for granted. It is conceivable that man in the distant future will retain some of the analogies and slang of the modern world, or will use Earth-specific comparisons to identify something; but using those same phrases and comparisons in a fantasy work weakens it. Likening a witch hunt to Salem or comparing a vicious, genocidal tyrant to Hitler is not appropriate in fantasy, yet those simple words convey volumes of images and information.

But are these considerations enough to explain the encyclopedic length of some fantasy epics? Not entirely. For one, there is the trilogy convention. For some reason—perhaps those listed above—the trilogy has become the standard in fantasy literature. Shorter works do exist, and longer works are gaining in popularity (at least among authors), but the trilogy is the base around which many fantasies are written. Also, some authors (or groups of authors) write several different works in the same world: *Redwall*, *Pern*, *Forgotten Realms*, and the *Saga of Recluse* all come to mind. As each of these stories revolves around different characters, they should not be likened to epic works like *The Wheel of Time* or *The Sword of Truth*.

Two more factors affect the length of fantasy series. The first is author pride. The world that authors create are real; there are people, places, and events that exist in their minds which have no direct bearing on the story, but have had a significant influence on one of the main characters, or on one of the secondary characters that influence the main characters. What proud creator wants only part of a work appreciated? There is a desire, a need, to make readers see the world as the author sees it, to understand all the details and nuances that affect the world and its characters, to *immerse* themselves in the world as completely as the author has.

And the final influence on fantasy, perhaps the most important one? The fans. Despite our grumbling, despite our complaints at having to wait two years between stories and our complaints that the end result was not as satisfying as we would have wanted; if not for our love of the works, our *demand* for more, they would not exist. Would Jordan be writing book eleven if not for the fanaticism with which his readers approach *The Wheel of Time*? Would Harry Potter have graduated his second year of wizard school if no one cared enough to want him to?

My advice: Cast not too many stones, fellow readers, lest we discover that the cure is worse than the disease.