



# The *Illuminata*

**Delving Deep Into The Worlds of Science Fiction and Fantasy**

## When Author's Attack

By Bret Funk

Earlier this month, an article was brought to my attention with which I initially took great exception. In it, literary watchdogs and those groups who may be a bit overzealous in warning away the uninitiated writer are criticized. The writer posits that such groups may have ulterior motives, that by scaring away the competition, they can keep an already crowded system from becoming worse.

That concept is not what infuriated me, though. Rather, it was the author's not-quite subtle suggestion that these 'self-anointed "experts"' are generally science fiction and fantasy writers, and poor ones to boot. The article even jumps topic for several paragraphs, dodging the issue of literary watchdogs in favor of describing, in detail, the type of speculative fiction writer these watchdogs are likely to be and what faults they are most likely to have.

However, carefully rereading of the article proved to me that the author did have a number of valid points, about literary watchdogs, speculative fiction writers,

and the entire industry. This month, I'd like to examine that article, adding my own flavorful commentary. To that end, quotes from the article will be offset in italics, and my comments will be in regular type. For those interested, the entire article can be found at [www.authorsmarket.net/youreyes.htm](http://www.authorsmarket.net/youreyes.htm).

[These author advocate's] *writing is typically characterized by the use of an overkill of adjectives, and by references to you being a victim of something. Their own book genre is almost always Science-Fiction or Fantasy. That's no co-incidence.*

Without knowing very many author advocates personally, I can neither vouch for their reading/writing habits nor argue that their preferred genre is not speculative fiction. I can tell you that I do know a number of speculative fiction readers and writers, and none of them are author advocates.

The SF writers I know tend to be opinionated and very vocal, another observation made by the writer in his article. However, the assertion that abrasive stubbornness, poor writing, and speculative fiction go hand in hand strikes a nerve. Poor writing is not the private domain of the SF writer; terrible writers exist in all genres and in both fiction and nonfiction. Additionally, one need not be an active participant in a system to comment on it. Many who have never taken up a pen (or keyboard as the case may be) or tried to publish a book are obnoxiously vocal on the subject. These people are the ones who irk me the most, the armchair quarterbacks telling the rest of us how to conduct our business and run our lives.

I would like to point out that the author of the article does post a disclaimer, stating that the *'The vast, vast majority of SciFi and Fantasy writers are serious, honest, great artists.'* He goes on to say that these talented, industrious writers work just as deserving and work just as hard to *'break through the barrier put up by the publishing dinosaurs.'*

*'The publishing dinosaurs.'* This is the crux of the problem, in my honest opinion, not cruel, greedy SF writers seeking to keep the commoners out of their Author's Only club. The current publishing system is an antiquated mess that shuns change and those who attempt to affect it. The big houses are only concerned with making money (and as businesses, making money should be their primary concern), but these houses will often disregard new talent in favor of old, knowing that name recognition goes a long way toward selling books. Stephen King would sell a million copies even if he wrote the book in his own, made up language, and the publishers know it. They will sink hundreds of thousands of dollars in marketing money behind an author who will sell regardless of advertising but will allocate only

### In This Edition

**When Authors Attack**

**RPG Corner v3.1  
Creating Scenarios**

**Fandom Onion (Part 3)**

**KeyCOMMENTary  
Transformations**

**The Writer's Block  
Punctuate It!**

**All Fall Down  
Why Heroes Hurt Us**

**Reviews  
Legacies  
Apocalypse Crucible  
Music From SF Movies  
The Punisher  
Dead to the World  
A Civil Campaign  
Spaceballs  
Assassin's Quest  
The Child Goddess**

# The RPG Corner (v3.1): Creating Scenarios

by Doug >!< Roper of EPIC Gaming

## Getting Started

When sitting down to write this column, I was torn in two directions. One would have me do a kind of step through of the process that begins with an idea, and ends with a finished scenario, ready to run. The other direction was to take a look at the key elements of role-play scenarios (character, plot, setting), and discuss how they differ from their literary counterparts. As I constantly wavered back and forth, I tried to separate the two discussions so that I could talk about them concisely, without losing anyone. I have since decided that I can't do this, because I feel that the process I use to create scenarios and adventures might not be the process that someone else would use. I don't want to fence anyone in by setting up a "canon" method of design, so what follows is less like an individual column, and more like the beginning of a longer discussion about designing scenarios.

### *Elements of Good Scenarios*

Take a minute to look back on your favorite moments from books, TV, and movies. Now that you have those favorite moments in your mind, I'd like you to think about what exactly made those moments, those experiences, so special to you that they rank at the top of a list that contains all of the movies or books you've seen or read. What makes the experience unique, rewarding or horrible, and ultimately memorable?

More likely than not, at least within the realm of entertainment, the one thing (or group of things) that makes a scene or whole work stand out can be found in the list which follows: interesting characters, plot advancement and twists, dramatic tension, impressive visuals, engaging conflicts, and/or brilliant dialogue. These elements are key to making any kind of media stand out, and it is no coincidence that they can apply universally to books, movies, and Role-Playing Games.

I won't spend a great deal of time going into the mechanics of the creation of these elements, as there are already more books on the subject than I think you can imagine. These elements are the same in film and writing because films begin with writing, and so do great Role-Play Gaming experiences. It's in the game designer's hands (though not exclusively) where the game will ultimately fly or fall, and in this discussion I'd like to look at the ways in which these elements are used exclusively in Role-Playing Games. I'll leave the discussion of these elements as they apply to

broader writing to those who have more experience. Those already familiar with the elements' literary incarnations will notice subtle differences once they cross over into the realm of real-time interaction found in Role-Playing Games.

### *Getting Started*

The first thing that you should do, after verifying what kind of Model you wish to work within (see last month's column) is decide whether or not the game you are designing is going to be brief, or protracted. Brief scenarios, what I call "One-Shots" are designed to be started and completed in one session of gaming, while protracted scenarios may last many, many sessions, and involve a series of individual scenarios that combine into a larger scenario by having certain plots, settings and characters carry through the different scenarios. Protracted games are often given monikers that reflect their lengthy nature, such as Campaigns and Chronicles. Whatever you decide to call them, the two types are similar in most ways, but differ strongly in a few.

Obviously, the first difference is the pacing of the story. One-Shots tend to move quicker, highlighting important events and glossing over details that aren't vital to the plot. One-Shots are usually much simpler in their plot structure, and the Game Master must make sure that any small mystery is explained by the end of the scenario. Protracted scenarios tend to involve much more detail, and a slower pace throughout the beginning and middle, as the players slowly gather information and power, and uncover the plot. In multi-part scenarios, mysteries abound, and are not necessarily solved before the end of a given session. In One-Shots, bad guys are usually clearly defined, and the purpose of the scenario is never really in question. Long running scenarios can afford to dirty the water much more, as the players don't really have time pressure in the solving of mysteries and intrigues. Plot design can be multilevel, and can have as many subplots and tangents as the players and Game Master can tolerate without getting lost in them, and more often than not, NPCs can change sides and hidden enemies creep out of the shadows only reluctantly.

The Recreational and Social Models prefer the One-Shots, while the other models tend to favor protracted scenarios. Knowing which one you have to design for is vitally important to prevent player boredom and Game Master frustration. Players that want a quick

Con't on page 14

# Peeling the Fandom Onion (Part III)

by Terry Crotinger/montanasings

As I get ready to dish up my stew, laden with veggies and heavy on the onions, I realized that Science Fiction interest groups are made of many ingredients, just like my stew! I listed the following non-official demographics while I cleaned the counter of all the carrot tops and onion peels:

*Older fans* (50-ish to 60+) blazed the trail for many organized groups having to depend on local calls (if they had a phone), snail mail, carbon copied letters and word of mouth to inform others of their existence. These were the pioneers, the individuals, who started the customs and passed on the stories that *defined* fandom decades ago. Many in fandom respect our elders, creating for them a special place at Cons, keeping fandom aware of their contributions without being sappy. I applaud those groups and individuals who practice the lost art of respectful recognition.

*Middle-aged "established" fans* (30somethings to 50+) tend to embrace a more global and realistic sense of fandom but have less time/money to enjoy them if they have kids/family, a job, a car payment, mortgage, etc. This group is less transient and loyal than younger fans but have kept fandom alive for the last thirty years.

*Younger fans/fandom* (Junior/High school and 20somethings) don't have the appreciation of tradition and protocol. But, as a result, they also see fewer boundaries so that what was once "science" and "fiction" has now branched into interest groups under the label of "science fiction". Younger fans see fandom as universal thanks to internet access. But they have the disadvantage because real-time, live experience is limited and the science fiction field has exploded in so many directions in the span of fifteen years. Like older fans, this group invented, nay, trail-blazed the next generation of what *defines* science fiction!

So I took this same information and applied it to groups and immediately understood (not agree with, but I understood the process) why some of the older, established groups feel entitled to celebrity because they have "paid their dues" many times over with their loyalty and endurance. The result is an inward-focused group that tends to be resentful of younger groups who have easy access to resources and periodicals, other members, and appear to have more money/time than they did. Younger groups struggle to be accepted in the whole 'group' sci-fi universe (usually a state-wide problem). They tend to be inward focused because they either don't know any better or they are trying to send a message to others of their legitimacy. There are layers upon layers to this.

No wonder I am weepy as I scoop onion peels into the trashcan. As a people, the extremists, by my count, tip the balance in any group. They are spontaneous and energetic but often unaware that they are bruising toes or breaking bones in their groups, no matter what age bracket they or their group fit into. In a perfect world, a balance of personality types would smooth the rough edges and work cooperatively with each other.

"Reality check, please." Being so inward focused can make political enemies, creating factions that go beyond opinions. There are verbal assassinations as one group slams another group. I hear this specifically about who puts on the better Conventions, who has done it longer than 'xyz' has or has the best guests, bigger budget.... Perhaps these comments are said in jest? Then it is well to remember that anyone listening may not come away with the understanding of good will and cooperation—I know I don't!

There is a bright spot on the side of the coin. There *are* groups who know how to be groups. They know how to integrate others within themselves and find a place where they feel wanted and accepted. The fun groups, the accepting groups, *look outward*. I'm not talking about finding more publicity for their groups. I'm talking about searching for ways to bring science fiction to others by various ways (and conventions don't count!). Outward-looking groups tend to have one activity that is a service to the public. Here are some examples that are individual and/or group appropriate and inexpensive:

Develop and maintain (that's the key) a sci-fi library or section of used books at the local hospital, half-way house, children's home... brainstorm with your group, you'll come up with more.

Volunteer as a reader in your child's classroom, reading a science fiction selection (approved, of course) while the teacher takes a break and/or enjoys it with the class.

Mentor a high school student with an interest in science fiction to start an on-campus interest group or forum.

Offer to present at the local library: this could be anything from a short course on types of science fiction (and of course, plugging your own group is absolutely appropriate as you also have referrals to other opportunities in your community) to performing skits at the Children's Reading hour. Even demonstrating the best way to catalogue and store collectables as a short topic might find a niche no one has itched in your community.

Con't on page 15

## Transformation:

Evolution. It's inevitable.

Man, a mineral, an idea: all things change as they are acted upon by outside forces. Some – consider the flower – are acted upon by their immediate environment and as a consequence they either grow or they wither. While the bud's propensity for growth may be built-in, there can be no denial that elements outside of the flower influence its course. The intensity of the sun might speed fruition; the timing and quantity of the rain determine the bloom. Likewise, the sun and the rain could as easily kill the bud, or weeds choke the life from its roots.

So, too, is the bloom of a character. It is nipped or enriched by circumstances beyond her control. The waif protagonist may indeed possess an intrinsic make-up that points toward growth – toward overcoming the hurdles placed before her on her quest – and yet should circumstances sour, she may not prevail. She may not even survive.

This is the archetype of *Transformation*. It is the root archetype of all story. Indeed, it is the primary arc of life, itself. We change. Our circumstance change. And in stories, the characters change. Or they should.

Often *Transformations* take the form of a resolution or redemption, yet these outcomes comprise only one side of the archetypal coin. After all, to wither on the vine is also to be transformed: a *dissolution*, we might say, in place of *resolution*. But what remains steadfast in the arc of story is this: change takes place. If a character has been unaltered by the events of the story that has just finished unfolding around him, then what have we witnessed? Why have we just read the ten or the seven-seven or the four hundred and forty pages that we just read?

As the writer, you can send your heroine on the most hair-raising, tumultuous adventure of all literary time, but if your waif protagonist returns to the starting block – her home, perhaps – without having been transformed in some way, then the story was merely a long-winded but vacuous tale. It was a roller-coaster ride; a cheap and fleeting thrill, but offering nothing meatier to nourish the mind of the reader.

To be sure, roller coaster tickets do sell. People buy them all the time. They enjoy the brief rush. But then what will they do? They'll get right back on again – precisely because the feeling ends as soon as the ride does. This is lack of *Transformation*. Nothing learned,

nothing retained; nothing gained or lost. You can certainly pen an adventure akin to an amusement park ride, but you won't fulfill the true longing of your reader, namely to experience vicariously the transformation – be it for better or worse – of your protagonist.

What sort of change might a character undergo? Transformation can take many forms. Certainly, it can be obvious: physical change, for instance. The character can be scarred or wind up stranded in or restricted to a whole new environment foreign to what they were accustomed to. The change might be mental: a gaining of knowledge or an acquisition of new abilities. It might be emotional: how have the character's feelings changed because of all she has undergone? Or it might be a spiritual change, which is perhaps the strongest type of change a character can experience.

From the shortest piece of flash fiction to the longest novel, you can be sure *Transformation* takes place. Often not only does it take place in a major way on the whole, but wee transformations are happening all along. These interim transformations are tightly linked to the dynamics of the story, which we talked about some columns ago.

For your final assignment, writers, identify the primary transformation each of your characters undergoes in the course of your story. Then, try to identify at least five minor transformations for each character as well. Readers, do the same thing with the book or books you have been analyzing.

With that, I'll wish you well and encourage you to e-mail me if you have any questions or comments. This may very well be my last column in the *Illuminata*, so I want to extend my thanks to all the staff, but most especially to Bret Funk, our esteemed editor-in-chief, who has been a friend. He has shown himself to be a man of many good qualities, just like the pair of waif protagonists in his own novels, and just as Jeran and Dahr have experienced, I wish him many thrilling adventures, meaningful *Transformations*, and a masterful ending fit for a king.

Almost everything about a human creature is ridiculous, except its ability to suffer bravely and die gallantly for whatever it loves and believes in.

— Heinlein

# The Writer's Block: PUNCTUATE IT AND FORGET IT!

by Charles Gramlich and Y. Du Bois Williams

For this column, I thought I might revisit one of the simplest things that writers need to do to make their work readable, but one that troubles some of us more than it should. I'm talking about punctuation, and I know it troubles me. The genesis for this piece came from grading term papers in my Comparative Psychology class. As usual, I found papers that were virtually unreadable because of poor grammar or because the punctuation looked like as if it had been tossed in like croutons in a salad. I quickly grew tired of writing "Lost me" or "I have no idea what you mean" alongside student sentences and decided to create some quick primers for use in my classes next year. I thought the one on punctuation would be easy to write but I found that I had to look up many things myself and recruited a colleague to help. Perhaps many of us could use a refresher, so, without further ado, I present: "Punctuate It and Forget It!"

## Periods and Commas:

Often, the best writing, and certainly the clearest, is built primarily out of simple declarative statements that end in periods. The sentence you are reading now is an example. So are the next two. Declarative sentences are like a single thought. A period tells you the thought is over.

There's nothing wrong in stringing more than one thought together in a sentence, but it becomes confusing if the sentence runs on and on and on, or if there are no pauses to allow the reader to take a breath. When two or more thoughts are strung together you'll often need to inject an occasional quick-stop, a "space to breath." This requires a comma, a place to pause before moving to the next thought. Each of the sentences in the paragraph you've just read used commas in this way, including the one you're reading now.

## Question Marks and Exclamation Points:

Question marks appear after direct questions. (Did you write today?) Exclamation points are for emphasis. (Of course, I wrote!) Question marks show up in many places, though more often in fiction than non-fiction. Exclamation points often appear in fiction, mostly in dialogue, but are not commonly used in non-fiction. Even in fiction they should be used as little as possible outside of dialogue. They call too much attention to themselves and quickly lose their power.

## Semicolons:

Semicolons join complete, independent clauses when you don't use connecting words such as "and" or "but." For example: "As a patient, Steve Reasoner took accurate notes on the actions of the other patients; he also watched and recorded the behaviors of the staff members." If you exchanged the semicolon for a period and capitalized "he" you'd have two separate sentences, each of which serves as an independent clause in the larger sentence. When using a semicolon, though, always check to make sure that there are two complete sentences being connected. Otherwise you'll end up with a dangling phrase like: "Reasoner took notes on the other patients; on staff members too."

Why use semicolons then? Why not just separate the sentences? The reason is that semicolons emphasize or contrast the connection between two thoughts a little more strongly than if they were separated by a period. And sometimes a writer wants to call just that kind of attention to thoughts.

## Colons:

Despite the similarity in names, colons do very different kinds of work than semicolons and the two shouldn't be confused. Colons are versatile enough to be used in business letters (Dear Mr. Hawk:), in business memos (TO: & FROM:), in time measurement (it's 12:20), and in separating titles from subtitles (Bobby Fischer: The Story of a Chess Prodigy). As the following examples show, they are also used to introduce a list, just prior to a quote, and to call attention to the phrase that follows the colon.

Introducing a List. There are both negative and positive psychological stressors: college graduation, marriage, birth of the first child, spousal abuse, divorce, job promotion, etc.

Prior to a Quote. The teacher did say one thing interesting: "School is out on Thursday." Note, though, that the colon is used only after a complete sentence (independent clause) that introduces the quote. If the sentence isn't complete then a comma should be used instead. Example: She told him to, "Go play in the street."

Calling Attention to a Phrase. There are two kinds of people in this world: those who love cats and those who eat them.

## Quotation Marks:

Quotation marks are generally used for three purposes in writing, to set off words that are used in

Con't on page 15

# All Fall Down: Why Heroes Hurt Us

by Rajni Mandara

It begins almost from infancy: spoon-fed notions of generous, omniscient beings. They're powerful and mysterious; some can fly; most bear gifts – and they usually know what we like. Not only that, they know when we are sleeping; they know when we're awake. They know when we've been bad or good, so we're good, for goodness sake. Santa. The Tooth Faerie. The Easter Bunny. God.

From these earliest designs flow heroes made closer to our own image, yet they are imbued with capabilities that earn them the prefix *super*. Many of these masterful beings also fly – or seem to: Superman, Batman, Spiderman, Power Rangers. Universally they face down evil and rescue those in need. They are strong, clever, and usually know some form of martial arts. Less fluffy, less soft around the edges, our heroes and our heroines evolve into icons of justice and testosterone.

The only difference here is that usually by the time this second type of hero falls within our emotional radar range we can know that they aren't real. We willingly buy into the fantasy, but we know that it's pretend. But the earlier icons – those inflicted upon us in toddlerhood -- are just cruel. They set us up for heartbreak. I can still recall the crushing sentiment of betrayal I felt when told that Santa was illusion, distinctly inferring from the news that I had been made a fool. The feeling burned down over me that day as though someone had dumped a bucket of smoldering ash on my head. I had been duped and the joke was on me. From there it wasn't a far leap to the conclusion that those other impossibly generous all-knowing beings were just as illusory.

So, what is the deal?

What longing within us drives us as humans to concoct our little icons? Why is reality no good? Wouldn't we get a lot further, evolve a lot faster, if we stopped looking for gifts and ceased waiting to be rescued? Is it our own innate convictions of inadequacy that prompt us to design these *Captains Courageous of the collective unconscious*?

The problem with heroes is that, eventually, they all fall down, and what we are left with is a sense of hollow disappointment. When we are small, even our parents and our older brothers and sisters, our teachers and community leaders – these are all heroic figures in our minds. They are big, capable, brave and knowledgeable. But as we grow in their image the playing field is leveled and we see they are no different than us.

Some might say that heroes are good for us; that they establish in young minds desirable characteristics for which to strive. But might they not also set us up to be impaled upon the mental lances of loss and of unattainable longing? We are, after all, only human. Why not, then, let that be enough? Why not raise our children from the start to recognize that they are already okay, just the way they are, and teach them that life is just what it appears to be: what'cha see is what'cha get. No one flies. No one sees you when you're sleeping -- unless you count that infrared-capable heat-sensing satellite the government installed over your house – and no White Knight is coming to your rescue. Get over it.

Children should be taught that heroism doesn't lie within the sole province of those who have been graced with superpowers. Heroism is within the reach of everyone. And just as essential to recognize is the fact that heroism, by nature, is transient. The same neighbor who acted heroically one day – perhaps effecting a dramatic rescue as a local volunteer firefighter serving his community – went home the following day and beat his wife.

There is a mix of hero and horror within each of us. If we were made in the image of god, then we were made in the image of satan as well. We choose. We are dealt a hand and we play it as we see fit. You and I are the hero or the horror in another's day.

Here's to the hero in each of us; may she blaze her way to the surface.

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## Illuminations SF Writing Contest

The *Illuminations* writing contest is rapidly nearing its deadline. Hurry to get your submissions in before the rush. Winning entries will be included in an anthology published by Tyrannosaurus Press.

A one-time fee of \$5.00 (per entry) is required to submit a story; multiple entries are allowed. This fee will be used to help finance similar future projects. Our goal is to help talented but unknown writers gain some exposure. Both digital and hard copies of each entry are required. Send correspondence to:

**Illuminations Writing Contest**  
**Tyrannosaurus Press**  
**PO Box 8337**  
**New Orleans, LA 70182-8337**

For full contest guidelines and details, please visit <http://www.tyrannosauruspress.com>.

## Reviews

### Legacies (Corean Chronicles, 1)

L. E. Modesitt, Jr.



2002, Tor

PRICE, STYLE

ISBN

Review by D.L. Parker

Let me say at the outset that any negative opinions expressed in this review of L. E. Modesitt, Jr.'s new "Corean Chronicles" book, "Legacies", have NOTHING to do with the fact that the villains in this story are all BLONDES.

The uncharacteristic blonde females in this story enslave nice young men with killing torques around their necks and tote swords and guns. No, any unkind comments are strictly in the spirit of a fair review, NOT in defense of my fellow Goldilocks...and this will be the only blonde joke you will read in this review, TRUST me.

In spite of the tantalizing hint of fair-haired fun mentioned above, alas, there are no jokes in this story. Alucius, the hero of "Legacies", is, in fact, a very serious and responsible young man. To quote his grandfather, grandmother, and mother, Alucius is "ALWAYS good." The lad's father died in conscripted military service, leaving Alucius in the care of the said mother and grandparents. The family survives as herders of "nightsheep". These are seriously horned and ornery creatures not exactly related to the placid bovines of our acquaintance. It's a tough job.

As the story opens, Alucius is approaching conscription age, and the same draftee status looms ominously on the horizon for him. His people (Alucius lives in what is called the "Iron Stem" of the Iron Valleys) are fighting on several fronts, primarily against the invading (and matriarchal – those bad, bad blondes again!) Matrites. But though Alucius is, sure enough, forced to part from his family and tearful fiancé as soon as he has the fateful birthday, there's more to the new cavalry trainee than meets the eye. Herders through the generations have depended on an elusive and mostly secret "Talent" to help them fight the sanders, sandwolves, and other perils of their profession. Alucius has an unusual degree of that "Talent". With the aid of that Talent, he's soon serving as a scout on the front-line battle against the Matrites.

But the Matrites have some fearful weapons from the dark past, and worse – a form of the same Talent

that Alucius inherited. And scouts, of course, have an exceptional exposure to danger. Alucius, in spite of his abilities, is struck down by the enemy and carried away captive into the land of the Matriel – an ageless blonde beauty who rules over a peace enforced by killing torques and strangely polluted Talents.

The Matrites, a practical people, make good use of their captives. Alucius, by virtue of his military skills, is pressed into the enemy's cavalry. The torque around his neck ensures either swift and complete obedience or instant death. But using his talent and his wits, it looks like Alucius is going to survive and even prosper in the enemy's service... if he can hide his own Talent. The Matrites are all too aware of the dangers of such abilities. In fact, using that increasingly powerful Talent of his and some supernatural encouragement, it looks Alucius might even find a way to strike at the Matriel herself...

Readers who enjoy a gnat's eye view of military life, cavalry-style, will especially enjoy this book. Almost the entire middle of the book is taken up with convincingly detailed military actions. This may bog down the forward action of the plot, as the chief purpose of these sections appears to be the author's interest in convincing us what a brilliant and talented individual Alucius As Good As Alexander in Action is.

Fortunately, the grand old cavalry skirmishes are entertaining in themselves (this reviewer went to bed with echoes of "Squad HALT! Rifles ready! Squad FIRE!" ringing in her head afterwards). But alas, the other purpose of describing Alucius's action sequences and rise to power, enlightening us as to the character of the hero, failed for this reader. By the end of the book, I just *didn't especially like* this particular hero. Alucius is portrayed as a decent and responsible young man at the start of the story. He works hard, respects his elders, and nobly refuses to bounce his fiancé's bones when the opportunity is offered – he's "Always Good", remember – no premarital sex for him! This was a refreshing portrayal of a character, to be sure.

But by the time Alucius joins the Matriel's army, my good feelings about the hero had begun to slowly evaporate. He's still quiet and a bit of a loner. He's still diligent – now in the service of the enemy. Killing is just one of the things this noble lad Has To Do. He isn't tempted into spending his competently earned – i.e. killed for – silvers on wine, women, or song. He does worry about his grandmother, but he sleeps well enough, apparently untroubled by killing in the service of the Matriel. No inner conflict or anguish

# Reviews

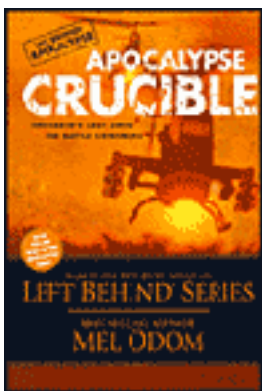
about What Has To Be Done here! The charming youth becomes – well, a little bit chilling, and definitely less interesting than he could have been to this reader.

By the time Alucius finds out how to kill with his Talent, and starts using that ability, I was less than sympathetic. Pesky blonde Matriel officer in his way? No problem. Gone. His fellow countryman, Major Dyer, less than receptive to someone who'd served in the enemy cavalry? No problem. Gone again – Superman just causes him an apparent heart attack. The unfortunate Dyer just keels over in his saddle and bothers Alucius no more. It reminded me of that hilarious song sung by Koko the Tailor (a.k.a. Executioner) in "The Mikado": "They'll none of them be missed..."

There's an old truism that it's awfully boring to read about Superman. Since this is a rather chilly, unemotional, vigilante version of Superman, this reader is not looking especially hard for the sequel to the story, "Darknesses", at this moment. The teaser included at the end of "Legacies" looks too familiar... there's Alucius having to Off four villains at one whack, I mean, one thought, all over again...

This is too bad, because much of this book is very well written – I am a fan of L. E. Modesitt, Jr.'s "Recluse" and, to a lesser extent, his "Spellsong" cycles, and that same craft can be seen at work here. But unfortunately the well-written action scenes of "Legacies" are not combined with a likeable protagonist for this reader. Pick up "Legacies" if you'd like to read about well-written cavalry engagements or just have a fantasy of being a Superman who can kill with a thought (if you are having any kinky fantasies about those dominating killer blondes, forget it – this story is serious stuff). Otherwise, pick up something from L. E. Modesitt, Jr.'s "Recluse" cycle instead and enjoy yourself in a better story.

## Apocalypse Crucible Mel Odom



Tyndall, May 2004  
\$14.99, 326 pp.  
ISBN 0842387765  
Review by Harriet Klausner

Millions of people across the globe have disappeared and few know why. In Sanlifina, Turkey, First Sergeant Samuel Adams 'Goose' Gandiers knows that his five year old son Chris has disappeared out of the Fort

Benning nursery. Though concerned, he tries not to think about it as the Syrians are about to attack the American lines and he doesn't have enough military support to stop them. A rogue CIA agent Icarus tries to find Goose to tell him something about the disappearances while his immediate superior Captain Remington wonders what to do with the sergeant who has chosen a different road than him.

In Fort Benning, Georgia, Goose's wife Megan is ordered to keep a low profile until her trial when she has to defend herself in regards to a teenager she was counseling who vanished while falling off a building; his body was never found, just the clothes he wore. Megan counsels another suicidal teenage when the MPs shoot him.

Alone and separated by more than an ocean, Megan and Goose struggle with their faith as demons from hell prey upon mankind.

*Apocalypse Crucible*, the sequel to *Apocalypse Dawn*, is an exciting military thriller that takes place over a twenty-four hour period. There is plenty of action as a military skirmish is vividly described that readers feel they are at the battlefield. The protagonist's wife questions what is happening in her world but at her lowest point, she finds the courage to learn the truth that everyone left behind wants to deny. Mel Odom has written a powerful tour de force and readers will want to read the next book in this series as soon as it is published.

## Music from the Science Fiction Movies and TV Festival Studio Orchestra

St.-Clair Entertainment Group

Release Date: 1998

Total Tracks: 12

Review by Terry Crotinger

No Image Available

This is a fun and awful CD for Science Fiction collectors if less than perfection is acceptable. The upbeat version of the same sci-fi themes offered in countless collections is hardly acceptable performance-wise, but this one is unique and off key. Kooky as it sounds, however, this is slowly becoming one of my most prized CD's for the simple reason it sounds like what it is—a studio orchestra who may or may not have been given the music before hand and taped during the first and only rehearsal. A community or college orchestra might have accomplished the same

## Reviews

sound with a few rehearsals. Studio musicians seldom get that luxury; often it is taped and canned with the first run through. This CD is flawed; wrong notes and poor intonation abound, themes and dynamics get a little mixed up, but this performance *feels* real; alive. I can even forgive the poor trumpet player who comes in at the wrong place and covers as best he can. This sounds fun and honest, like music should be when thrown together at the last minute. This CD was born around the late 1990's at the time several cheap sci-fi knock-offs were offering the same tired tunes to buyers with the same science fiction themes and a different talent to play it. This is in a Meco style, so be prepared for disco throwback.

With a digital backbeat *a la* 90's rhythm machine, even Men In Black is acceptable and the vocals are definitely not Will Smith quality, but more gutsier, more off-the-street-corner do-wop group that works for this CD, it works well. The only thing that cheese'd me was the Star Trek theme offering, but even that had the dance-floor quality that makes the entire CD great workout music. The absolute strangest cut is a not-quite-upbeat variation of *2001: A Space Odyssey's* Also Sprach Zarathustra. I remember lying in my bed in Houston (NASA, Space Center...) when I was a kid listening to my battery-powered prized AM radio to KILT (610AM). Every night at ten o'clock ("Do you know where you're children are?") at night they played this theme before the next program aired. With all the lights off and waiting for the brass to build from the beginning harmonic sequence to the resonance that developed into full biting glorious harmony, goose bumps rose from head to toe. Scared the bejeebers out of me as I listened there in the dark every night. I was a Zarathustra junky and I didn't know I was until I saw the movie decades later (I'm a late bloomer).

This offering of Zarathustra doesn't do that for me in the least, but it does provide a beat I can't sit still for. Upbeat, with a driving bass and a traffic sound that makes me think of New York... it's not bad at all... just studio quality; keep that in mind.

For sometimes and serious collectors, this CD is awful if perfection is what is required. Otherwise, I highly recommend it... and remember, the word here is STUDIO Orchestra. It is a fun listen. Really!

### The Punisher Does Justice Thomas Jane, John Travolta,



Lion's Gate Films  
Dir. Jonathan Hensleigh  
Review by Sherri Craig

One look at the poster for *The Punisher* gave me an uncomfortable feeling in the pit of my stomach. There was John Travolta staring back at me. John Travolta, the *villain*, was the center of attention, not Thomas Jane, who actually plays the title

character. Don't get me wrong, I like John Travolta, but the fact that the movie's poster has nothing to do with the hero does not bode well for the movie.

Luckily, the old adage, you can't judge a book by its cover, or in this case, you cannot judge a movie by its poster, is true. This movie was surprisingly good. The plot, while deviating slightly from the Punisher's origin, was really well written and came together quite nicely in the end. The actors all performed well, especially Thomas Jane. Travolta, contrary to the poster, did not dominate the film. The most surprising quality of this film was its humor. It was unexpected and refreshing, though, oddly, many critics just didn't see it. I guess that might say something about my sense of humor.

Having never actually read *The Punisher* comic book, I was only slightly familiar with the origins of Frank Castle, a.k.a. The Punisher. I knew, basically, that Castle was a Marine on leave in New York and that his wife and children were murdered by the mob when they accidentally witnessed a mob killing in the park. This pushed Castle over the edge, forcing him to turn vigilante and don the skull print shirt of The Punisher. I also knew that The Punisher's brand of justice has nothing to do with trials and prison and everything to do with guns and death.

The movie plot was similar to the actual origin, and the slight changes worked well. In the movie, Castle is an undercover FBI agent (former special ops in the military) in an international arms smuggling case. The case ends with the inadvertent death of the youngest son of Tampa, Florida's millionaire mogul and all around shadowy figure, Howard Saint. Castle retires this job, and before settling into his new life, he makes a pit stop in Puerto Rico for a family reunion.

## Reviews

Meanwhile, the distraught Saint sends his men out to find the man responsible for his son's death. Saint's men eventually uncover classified information stating that Castle was the undercover agent, and Saint sends his best men to kill Castle. Saint's wife, however, is not happy with merely Castle's destruction. She calls for the extermination of his whole family.

This is exactly what happens, not only are his wife and son (the movie leaves out his other child, a daughter) killed, but every Castle at the family reunion – mother, father, aunts, uncles, and cousins – is shot down. Castle's wife and son are run down on a pier, and Castle, himself, is beaten, shot, and blown up, only to be rescued by an islander. A few weeks of strenuous healing later, Castle turns up at the site of the massacre to collect his dad's custom 1911 Colt 45s and a black t-shirt his son had given him: a black t-shirt with a white skull on the front.

Believed dead, Castle returns to Tampa to make Saint's life hell, and he succeeds quite well. He finds an apartment in a building inhabited by a close group of misfits, turns his car into an armored tank, accumulates a fire hydrant, and systematically begins destroying Howard Saint's life.

I left the theatre very satisfied with the film, and after a bit of research, was happy to discover that there were better posters. I have no idea what possessed my local theater to use that poster. Also in my research, I discovered that the major critics just did not get this film. Granted, most people did not think it was a total flop, but some of the comments were mind-boggling. Many people did not like it because it was depressing, bleak, unreal, and dark all the way through. My response to these critics is: 1. It is *The Punisher*! Was anyone really expecting a feel good movie with a happy ending? 2. Of course it was unreal, it was a comic book movie. Granted it was not as cartoony as *Spiderman* and it lacked the panel screens of *Hulk* (thankfully), but it was set up as comic book-esque from the title screen.

There was also quite a bit of criticism about the lack of humor in the movie, that there was no respite from the darkness. On this I really disagree. The humor may be awfully dark at some times, but there are times where the whole audience cracked up. There is a "torture" scene that had people chuckling, and Castle's encounters with Saint's two hired hit men, Harry Heck and the Russian, are funny, too. Castle's neighbors are really amusing, especially the "geek intervention" scene, where the trio invite him over for dinner

because they are worried about his drinking. Not only is this scene funny, but the audience can actually feel how uncomfortable Castle is in that situation.

There are other uncomfortable scenes, one in particular that deals with said goofy neighbors. I'm not going to spoil it, but the whole audience was squirming, and I was actually peaking through my fingers at the screen. You will know it when you see it. But every scene had a purpose in the movie, and I think that is why I liked it so much. There were quite a few times during the movie that I questioned a scene's relevance or that I thought it might go too far off base, but the movie always seemed to put an end to my questions and worries a few scenes after I expressed them. There were no loose ends left at all.

Overall, I felt the movie did what it set out to do, through and through. The movie does justice to the character. The story was solid, the action was great, and the actors were good. I might be mistaken, but I do not believe any of the action scenes were animated or enhanced (if they were, I couldn't tell). This makes the movie even better. I do not think fans of the comic will be disappointed, nor do I think, will people who can take it for what it is: A movie about a guy with nothing to lose, who is only out to punish those who are responsible for his loss.

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### Dead to the World Charlaine Harris



Ace, May 2004, \$19.95, 304 pp.

ISBN: 0441011675

Review by Harriet Klausner

When the Japanese invented synthetic blood and made it available to the general public, vampires came out of the closet, proclaiming their existence on global television. Bon Temp, Louisiana waitress Sookie Stackhouse met vampire Bill in the bar and they became romantically involved. She was elated that she was unable to read his mind, but when he hurt her she dumped him and vowed never again to get involved in any way with a supernatural being.

When she sees Bill's boss Eric running around naked, kindhearted Sookie takes him into her home. She learns that a witch has placed a curse on Eric because he is in the way of their plan to take over the

# Reviews

Shreveport supernatural community. They search for Eric while Sookie keeps him safe from the witches.

Meanwhile Sookie's brother negotiates a deal for Sookie's caretaker services but suddenly vanishes for no reason. Worried about her missing sibling, Sookie becomes frenzied when she learns that the witches are enhancing their power by drinking vampire blood. She must confront these dangerous deadly fiends if she is to rescue her sibling and keep Eric safe.

The more the heroine fights the witches the more she becomes part of the supernatural world. Even worse in her mind is that she has feelings for Eric. Fans will appreciate this endearing protagonist who combines vulnerability with a steely spine (kind of a supernatural Steel Magnolia) as for a change the woman is the heroic savior while the men are the perils of Paul. Fans will enjoy this offbeat read that combines elements of several genres to ensure that the world of Charlaine Harris seems real, one bite at a time.

## A Civil Campaign

Lois McMaster Bujold



Baen, 1999

PRICE, \$\$\$, Pages

Review by D.L. Parker

Midway through Bujold's latest Vorkosigan adventure, "A Civil Campaign", there's a memorable dinner. That's when I laughed out loud reading this book. The four female literary goddesses quoted in the dedication – Jane, Charlotte, Georgette, and Dorothy (that's Austen, Bronte,

Heyer, and Parker to you) – might have laughed out loud too. Because it's such a hilarious dinner.

Picture the hero of the story, the frustrated suitor, Lord High Auditor Miles Vorkosigan. He's runty, short, scarred, and sort of hunch-backed. He's never wooed a woman in earnest before, and with no real experience in the matter, he's settled on applying his considerable military expertise to the problem. Alas, the object of his grand passion is a skittish young widow. Lord Miles plans to ambush her affections; sneak up on her, sort of, while pretending an interest in flowers and gardens. Only he's made the mistake of telling everyone else of his love. At the dinner, right over the serving of bug butter, some fool lets his secret out. His intended is shocked, and his ambush prematurely sprung. What can Miles do? A good

military man knows that in the crunch, he might as well risk all. He blurts out his proposal before the dinner table: aunts, uncles and all. Of course, we know how excessively successful military strategies are in the pursuit of love...

Then there's his clone-brother Mark, the other dinner-table suitor. He hates to be mistaken for his illustrious brother, so he's fat. Short too, of course, and also unrequited in love. His sweetie, the beautiful Kareen, has returned from her daring college stay and suffers from Parental Proximity Paralysis now that she's back in the family fold. Said stunned parents, also attending the dinner party, have just learned that not only has their dear daughter Gone and Done It already, but the object of her affection and their possible future son-in-law is that... that fat, runty clone... Mark. It's more of a shock than the bug butter!

Do I keep mentioning the bug butter? It's a scheme of the commercially ambitious Mark, and served to the unwitting guests and host – his brother - in various forms at said party. Worse yet, the socially-inept scientist who developed the cockroach-ugly critters is also a guest. He's proudly modified their genes to display the Vorkosigan family crest in miniature, and brought some of them to the table to display his achievements.

It's enough to make another guest, the ambitious Lord Donno cum Donna, split his sides in merry appreciation. Lord Donno is a transsexual with his (formerly her) eyes set on a title she (he) would forfeit to the eldest male heir if she'd (he'd) retained her (his) former buxom female form. One of his former lovers (hers, I mean) is there too, and really, it's most uncomfortable for poor Ivan. And the party just goes down from there... tangled in its own hilarious skein of biological, dynastic, and romantic ambition.

There are a lot of books in Bujold's "Vorkosigan" saga, although this is the first and only one I've read to date. Fortunately, the story stands on its own; no prior experience necessary with those previous dozen. It's good, light-hearted fun, and if those quoted literary goddesses (except for Dorothy) might consider it a little low-brow, well, they might also smile. What else can you do about a story that ends in happy matings and the triumph of a scheming and already too-well-adjusted transsexual Count? The story might be a little farcical, of course, but like a candy apple, there's a little bit of bite beneath the goo, enough for this reader to smile. Once in a while a good Comedy of Manners can't be beat. Enjoy!

# Reviews

## Spaceballs (1987)

Director: Mel Brooks



Release Date: 5/27/97

ASIN: 0792844890

Rated: PG

Review by Terry Crotinger

This is one of those you either hate it or you love it flicks. *Spaceballs* attempted to spoof Star Wars, and as a new friend pointed out, spoofed the bad jokes bantered about at conventions since Star Wars opened in 1977. Perhaps it was just too soon to try something like this? Twenty-five years later it is no longer humorous. Unnecessary foul language notwithstanding, Rick Moranis was not right for the part of the Dark Helmet (aka Darth Vader), though Jim Belushi might have made this part come alive. Nah. Charlie Sheen? Too tall.

George Wyner, as Colonel Sandurz, was played about as well as the writing allowed as was the princess, played by Daphne Zuniga. Mel Brooks, playing several different parts, was fun to watch, as always. Dick Van Patten's King provided a wonderful double entendre that was fun at first, but his bit part, like the entire movie, was flat and one-dimensional even for a parody. I could add colorless, boring and predictable, but why kick a dead dog?

Speaking of dog, the late John Candy aka the Chewbacca knock-off almost gave this film a higher score in my book. I had purchased the movie because, a.) It was 'sci-fi' and b.) I admire Mr. Candy's work. He did play a believable Barf—in a gut-wrenching movie.

Salvaging this movie was the voice work of Joan Rivers but alas, her part was written poorly though her android body was fun to watch. I give Dot's actual actress, the incredible Lorene Yarnell (remember Shields and Yarnell?) credit for putting in a believable performance—the body language was superb. With the talent represented in this movie, it should have been top drawer. What happened?

I usually like Mel's movies. *Blazing Saddles* was the first Brooks' movie I went to with my husband-to-be. All the, uh, sound effects made for interesting conversation on the way home in between fits of uncontrollable laughter. *That* was a spoof flick. Mr.

Brooks succeeded with a stand-alone script that incorporated the style of the old spaghetti westerns. Ah, such fond memories.

Unfortunately, *Spaceballs* didn't get much in the *fond* memories category or the laughter department either. As the movie progressed, I started counting the laughs versus groans. The humor was not funny; it was embarrassing. The opening shot of that awful ship looked like every model that never sold, stuck together as an elementary school science project (which, for third graders, would be rather cool!). When the Spaceball's ship started to morph, I immediately figured it would 'transform' into a transformer, but a friend figured it out before the opening shot was even completed! Actually, some of *that* footage was fun. However, seeing a VERY young Bill Pullman was hard to watch. I wasn't sure if I was watching a parody of Han Solo or Bill Pullman trying to bring dignity to the role of a scoundrel? His fresh face and dark five o'clock shadow made it hard to determine just what role he was playing because for a few minutes, he reminded me more of Luke Skywalker. I'm confused. But I'm not confused on my opinion of this Farce. May "The Schwartz" be with you because if you watch *Spaceballs*, you will need it. (I can't believe I actually said that!)

## Assassin's Quest by Robin Hobb



Bantam Spectra, Jan 1998

\$6.99, Mass Market, 757 pp.

ISBN: 0553565699

Review by Scott H. Andrews

"Assassin's Quest" concludes Robin Hobb's Farseer Trilogy of the bastard FitzChivalry, a moody court assassin who had grown into a willful conspirator against his spiteful uncle Prince Regal. In this novel, Hobb uproots Fitz from the setting and conflict of the first two books, drags him through ponderous journeys with dry new characters, and then drains all the momentum of the trilogy with an abrupt ending.

"Assassin's Quest" opens with Fitz struggling to regain his humanity after living inside the mind of his wolf, and as before, Hobb evocatively describes this side

## Reviews

of Fitz's dual life. He chases away his closest mentors in a dark outburst that seems entirely real for his character, but then "Assassin's Quest" crumbles into three overly long journeys followed by a bloated endgame.

Fitz's walk inland to Tradeford sags with unnecessary fleeting characters, like the Old Blood couple and the minstrel family. His caravan trek and the ensuing flight into the hills feature more captures and escapes than a Bond flick, although the new character Starling is gradually well developed. The climb into the mountains drags almost as much as the awkward explanations of prophecy and time cycles, with repeated expositions of Kettricken's despair, Fitz's longing for Molly, and Kettle's sniping.

Fitz's early Skill dreams of continuing Red Ship raids provide a clever view for the first-person narrative to witness the horror facing the coastal Duchies, and the rage and pain that Regal still evokes in Fitz simmers through the first half of the novel. However, as the plot crawls toward a conclusion, the silly Catalyst prophecies and the Robert Jordan-like cycling of time concept displace these conflicts that drove the previous books. In the final quarter of the novel, Hobb bogs down in unnecessarily emotional entanglements between Fitz and Starling and the Fool and Kettle. When they finally do locate Verity, Hobb hashes through more exposition of the Skill and the Elderlings that barely justifies the trite fantasy cliché they carve from the stone. The final clash and summary chapter vanquish the Red Ships too easily and wrap up all the loose plot ends with the cold feel of a checklist.

Paradoxically, Hobb's delicate description of Fitz's constantly swirling emotions, his conflicting senses of duty to Verity and to himself, and the tactile descriptions of the Skilling and Wit are at the same time these novels' greatest strength and weakness. Fitz may be the most round and emotive fantasy character in decades, but his constant inner rehashing of the same old fears grows weary, especially when repeated over the long travel segments that dampen "Assassin's Quest."

## Writers Wanted

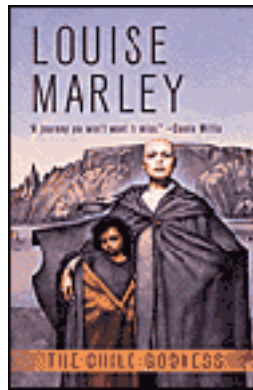
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"If in fact we are alone, it means that we're not only the heirs to the cosmos, but its guardians, which is a portentous thought.... Either alternative is amazing: whether we're alone or not alone."

— Arthur C. Clarke

### The Child Goddess

Louise Marley



Ace, May 2004, \$23.95, 336 pp.

ISBN 0441011365

Review by Harriet Klausner

In the distant future energy is needed to keep the expansion of the human race into the galaxy going. Power parks on uninhabited planets are built to supply that need. On the planet Virmund, a colony of lost children is discovered but

nowhere on that orb are any adults. The Extra Solar Corporation, responsible for the building of the power park, takes back one of the children, keeps her in isolation, and runs medical tests for fourteen months.

Isabel Burke, a priest in the order of Magdalene, is appointed as guardian for the child. However from the time she makes contact with the child, she is also put in isolation, unable to communicate in person with anyone from the outside. Thanks to the help of a gentle worker in the complex, Isabel is able to make contact with her ex-lover. Simon who has a lot of political clout is also a highly regarded physician. He discovers that Oa is over hundred years old but acts and thinks like a child and the powers that be want the secret of her inability to grow old. A group flies to Virmund to find out what is keeping the children young and killing the adults on the planet.

Louise Marley has written a very entertaining science fiction novel that deals with current social issues such as women becoming priests in the Catholic Church. The mystery of the children on Virmund is handled in a believable way using scientific methods based on research used today. The children who have no desire to be Peter Pans want to experience the wonders of aging. The tale belongs to the heroine facing adversity but determined to do the right thing.

## RPG Corner (con't)

“gaming fix” won’t be interested in slow movement or overly-cryptic clues, just as advanced players interested in deep mysteries will be dismayed by plots that are too easily concluded.

Just as authors are always told to “know their audience,” Game Masters must know theirs as well, but the GMs have two monstrous advantages over authors. The first is that a GM’s audience is very small, usually no more than a half dozen people. The second is the fact that the GM will interact directly with his audience constantly while running a game. This allows the GM to be much more flexible, and improves the chances of him (or her) being able to please everyone in his audience most of the time. By being able (and willing) to change plots and arrangements to accommodate the players, the Game Master can create a much happier Gaming group, but GM’s shouldn’t rely on players to dictate the types of games exclusively. GM’s with vision will want to tell a specific story, or orchestrate a particular adventure, and should do so according to their tastes. Tweaking the story to accommodate the players should be done carefully, but it should be done.

So now, working within a chosen model, and knowing how much time you want your players to spend on your scenario, it’s time to decide on what kind of scenario in particular you want to run, but first a word on character vs. plot-driven stories. In a lot of fiction, there are character driven stories, and while these are often some of the best kinds of stories, character driven RPG scenarios are tough to do. For a character driven story to work, there has to be one character driving the scenario, and this means that the other characters will have to take a back seat, and as I said in last month’s column, all of the characters are the heroes, not just one. Granted there will be times when a single character stands out (and we’ll talk more about this later) and that should be encouraged, but without a lot of trust between all of the players and in the GM, the others could come to feel neglected if a particular character’s catharsis goes on too long. Character-driven stories also require intimate knowledge of the character in question, and a detailed background for that character. If the GM is willing to invest the time, then by all means go for it. However, as the player plays his character more and more, and builds that character’s history within the games, there will be ample time for character advancement, and the creation of character-driven plots can begin to

coincide with the other material that the GM creates. Plot driven scenarios are easier for beginning GM’s, so we’ll focus on those first.

Do you want a swashbuckling adventure, a deep and confusing murder mystery, a profound journey of discovery, or a simple tale of loss and redemption? Deciding on a particular theme can help you in the long run, especially in protracted scenarios. By sticking with a theme in multi-part adventures, a Game Master can afford to drift with the smaller stories that will make up the larger one. For example, the theme of the larger story can be mystery and deception, while an individual part of that longer story is mainly concerned with an intense period of action, and not so much investigation. However the Game Master should be careful to always return to the basic theme of the story, to maintain a sense of interconnectivity between the smaller sections of the longer scenario. In One-Shots, there is almost no opportunity to wander from the main thrust of the story, because that’s not what One-Shots are designed for.

The inspiration for your scenario can come from anywhere. Scenarios have been built around a single character, a neat object and even an interesting turn of phrase. Game Masters should think of a scenario first as a movie, or a better yet, as a TV show or short story. This will give the GM an idea of the events that will make up the story, and how to move the Player-Characters through those events.

Next time we’ll look at how to set up these scenarios to make them more like an RPG adventure, and less like a scripted outlines. It’s a vital distinction, because not only does the GM not have any apparent control over the characters, he is also dependent on them for most of his dialogue. There are ways around this, and we’ll look at those too.

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## SF Reader Poll:

Speculative fiction comes in many flavors. Of the following sub-genres, which is your favorite?

- 1) Hard science fiction
- 2) High Fantasy
- 3) Sword and Planet
- 4) Alternate Reality / Alternate History
- 5) Horror

E-mail responses to:

[illuminata@tyrannosauruspress.com](mailto:illuminata@tyrannosauruspress.com)

### Fandom Onion (con't)

Form a Reader's Theatre (science fiction) group and look for ways to present in your community.

garrie keyman's idea: sponsor a child (see our parent website for more information!)

Talk to the Park & Recreation office in your area and offer a summer workshop on anime art and have an art show at the end. Suggest the results be displayed in the town hall, area banks and of course, the local library or museum.

Volunteer annually to work with a telethon, answering phones for donations (like PBS etc.)

Here's a wacky idea: Start talking with nursing homes and care homes to develop sci-fi interest groups. With a majority of our population about to be senior adults in the next fifteen years, living centers will be teaming with people who have a lot of time on their hands that would enjoy a sci-fi interest group if someone would start and/or maintain it.

Simply volunteering as a group has great benefits. I could go into group dynamics 101, but if your group wants to bond with each other and invite others, they need to be seen enjoying each other! You'll know when you've reached your objective when you see everyone participate at some level and/or no one wants to leave after the meeting is officially over.

As your group looks for projects, I offer one caveat. I've seen more than one great idea dashed as a faction insists that what they do *must* be related to science fiction. Just having your interested members, as a group, volunteering has benefits even if it is to attend the local workday at the community center. Others will see you as a fun (hopefully!) group to be with. They will ask questions and viola! You have done a good deed and gained positive publicity even though it may have little to do with spreading the sci-fi gospel.

Isn't that WHY we do this in the first place? Are we not, as a people – as a group – looking for others to share our interests and passions with? I hope so. We are looking for acceptance; the whole reason we bond together in the first place. We are circling the wagons and enjoying the stories by the campfire after a hard day. Everyone's invited; we just move back and make the circle bigger. Is there room for more? If not, "Game Over", you lose.

The stew is waiting to be eaten so grab a bowl. I'm proud how I chose the best ingredients and patiently let them simmer as long as needed so that I could share this with my sci-fi family. It took time and a few tears, but it should taste wonderful. And there is room at my table for many, many friends. May it be the same in your sci-fi family. Let's eat!

### Punctuate It (con't)

some special way, to identify material that is taken verbatim from someone else's written words, or to identify the direct speech of individual people. Here are some examples.

Word Used in a Special Sense. "Chaos" is a scientific theory.

Words Taken Verbatim From Another Person's Written Work. One of the more famous opening lines in literature comes from Ernest Hemingway's (1952) *The Old Man and the Sea*: "He was an old man who fished alone in a skiff in the Gulf Stream and he had gone eighty-four days now without taking a fish."

Direct Report of a Person's Spoken Words. The psychotic said, "My bones are drying up inside."

There are several rules for using quotation marks that people often fail to follow. First, periods and commas should appear inside quotation marks, as seen in the previous two examples. Second, semicolons and colons always appear outside quotation marks. Third, if quoting more than 39 words from a source you don't use quotation marks at all but, instead, indent the quote on both sides and put the page number in parentheses at the end. (See the section on the ellipsis in this chapter for an example.) Fourth, when one quote appears inside another one you put single (') quotation marks around the inside quote. For example: The patient said, "I hate it when my wife tells me to, 'Get a life.'"

### The Dash:

The dash is one of the least used but most frequently confused types of punctuation. In manuscript form it is almost always written as two side by side dashes (- -) and is always attached to the words near it. It often comes in pairs. (See the examples that follow.) The single dash (-) is different. It's used to connect two words into one word (red-hot, ice-cold) in a way that emphasizes the relationship between them.

Though the dash should be used sparingly, it can serve an important function, usually to highlight or emphasize a piece of information. Example 1: My family--seven brothers and eight sisters--is very close knit. Example 2: Daniel tried very hard to win Stacy's approval--and failed.

A dash can also be used to indicate an "aside," which is when an author injects personal comments or views into writing that is generally intended to be objective. This is usually going to appear only in non-fiction. Example: The survey found that many people

who were against abortion also supported the death penalty--a view that I find personally disturbing.

Finally, in fiction a dash is often used in dialogue to indicate when thoughts are broken off suddenly or are interrupted by another speaker. Say we have a character who starts to curse and then realizes his grandmother is present. You might indicate that by, "What the He--" Or if two characters are arguing you might see, (Speaker 1) "You never let me finish a--" (Speaker 2) "Because you never say anything worth listening to." The dashes in the first speaker's dialogue indicate that he or she never got to finish their sentence before they were interrupted.

### **The Ellipsis:**

An ellipsis is an omission of words. It's indicated by either three periods (...) or four periods, depending on whether it comes in the middle or at the end of a sentence. In non-fiction, it is usually seen when words are left out of a direct quote. Let's say, for example, that you want to quote some but not all of the following passage from *On Writing Well* (Zinsser, 1990).

"Writing is hard work. A clear sentence is no accident. Very few sentences come out right the first time, or even the third time. Remember this as a consolation in moments of despair. If you find that writing is hard, it's because it is hard. It's one of the hardest things that people do." (p. 13)

Using the ellipsis, you could produce something like the following. "Writing is...one of the hardest things that people do." Or you might try, "Writing is hard work. A clear sentence is no accident. Very few sentences come out right the first time..." An ellipsis indicates that you've left out some of the words from the section you're quoting.

In fiction, an ellipsis indicates that thoughts have "trailed off." Say we have a character who is unsure of what they are about to say. You might see something like, "Well, I thought that..." This indicates that the speaker is censoring his or her own speech rather than being interrupted by someone else. A similar process could be used to indicate a character's falling unconscious or even dying. "Tell... Ryan... that I. That I love..."

### **Underlining for Emphasis:**

When you want to emphasize a specific word within a sentence, you can do so by underlining it. For example: Romeo felt that he could never love anyone other than Juliet. This should be used sparingly or it will lose its effectiveness.

### **When Authors Attack (con't)**

a fraction of that amount to all of their new authors, and if those brand new, unknown names don't sell fast enough, they are back-listed and forgotten.

If this had been the writer's point, I would have agreed whole-heartedly, but at this point, he took a side road:

*But, alas, the SciFi and Fantasy genres have also attracted some of the lesser gods, writers who erroneously believe that SciFi, because it is set in a distant future, does not require believable storylines, or that Fantasy, because it is set in conditions that have never existed, does not need believable every-day characters.*

On this point, our friendly writer and I do agree. Good plots and realistic characters are important in every genre; science fiction and fantasy are no exceptions. Fantasy exists because of imagination; the unbelievable is supposed to happen. But as I have stated many times before, for fantasy to be successful, it must be realistic. I recently received a complaint about my own fantasy writing, not because of the magic system I use or the species I have created, but because too many nobles disliked formality and wanted to be called by their first name. This minor point made my fantasy stray too far from reality and lessened this one reader's enjoyment. It was a minor complaint, but if characters are too unbelievable or one-dimensional, they will detract greatly from the story.

And with science fiction, one should at least acknowledge the existence of science. And I am not referring to making up conveniences such as Hyper-Drives or Heisenberg Compensators; in fact, these created expedencies are exactly the kind of thing I do want to see. They acknowledge a problem posed by science and a solution, however unsupported or unlikely, to that problem. I refer specifically to the complete disregard to established scientific knowledge I have stumbled across from time to time. I am reminded of a short story I once read where the surprise ending was that the sun was orbiting a planet. I suppose the author had some grand point to make, but it was lost on me. A sun orbiting a planet?!?

*Some writers have built a name for themselves by writing spin-offs of hugely popular movies, such as **Star Trek**, after all the characters and story parameters had been handed to them on a silver plate... It requires some talent, but not too much, to write such a book.*

I see no harm in taking a writing assignment offered by a publisher. Writing a story about characters you

have grown up with and love is no crime. Fan fiction, in my opinion, is the greatest form of flattery; it shows that the creator's idea has taken on a life of its own and exists within the minds and hearts of others. I personally love Spider-Man, and if Stan Lee or the good folks at Marvel were to call me tomorrow and ask me to write a Spider-Man book, I'd drop every other project to get on board. The mere thought that my interpretation of the character would be validated in writing is exciting; whatever money might be involved is immaterial.

In a field as competitive as writing, a field in which our article-writer admits is hard to break into, where is the harm in taking an assignment that will put food on the table and perhaps bring an author the recognition he needs to get his own works published? And how does writing a book about Data and the Star Trek crew require any less talent than writing a book revolving around a teen prostitute in NY, or a hard-working farmer in the Midwest. I've read a number of general fiction books in my life and character types seem relatively identical from title to title.

Of course, maligning Star Trek writers is not enough. Our writer has the following to say about Star Trek fans:

*And it definitely calls for modesty if, no surprise there, the book sells. The millions of Star Trek aficionados will read just anything as long as it says Star Trek on the cover.*

Though I must reluctantly agree that a number of Star Trek fans would buy anything and everything with Star Trek on it, I do not feel that it is the norm. I am a fan (though perhaps not an aficionado), and though I have read several books, I have not read them all, and I'll even admit to having been bored by some of them.

But that misses the point entirely. So what if a million people read the book, not because of who wrote it but because of what he wrote about? A million people still read it, and if they like the author's style, they may seek out other things he's written. Exposure in such a manner is a good form of advertising (though the publishers do sometimes make it difficult to find out who actually wrote that book!).

*There are some others who, particularly in the field of Fantasy, rewrite all but everything under the sun that has already been written before. They rummage through books on mythology, steal a character here, borrow a plot line there, throw in a wizard from King Arthur, and literally loot all the mythologies ever written.*

This statement insults the intelligence of those who read it. To imply that only Fantasy writers are guilty of combining elements of stories to make new stories is as absurd as it is erroneous. People have been writing novels for a long time; by now, virtually every theme has been explored and re-explored, and most plots have been covered as well. I doubt a modern day fiction title exists that is not an amalgamation of other titles. Why else do so many authors in and out of SF describe their books as 'Harry Potter meets Van Helsing' or 'a sophisticated blend of *The Catcher in the Rye* and *Lady Chatterly's Lover*'. Since fiction comes from a combination of imagination and experience, it should come as no shock that elements of the stories an author has encountered – be they books, movies, TV shows, or some other media – will influence his writing

***The vast majority of serious SciFi and Fantasy authors frown at this. They go to the supermarket, open that cheap book, see what these writers got away with, and they feel their frustration rise. "Why were these people published? My own book is at least two levels better."***

I'm not sure where the author gets this information, but I can't necessarily gainsay him. Literature is a subjective field, though, and just because one person does not see merit in a work does not mean others do not, and somebody – be it an editor or the nephew of a corporate bigwig – must have liked a title for it to slip through the production process. I know there are cases of publishers rejecting books from new authors merely because they are too long or part of a series, but I hope this practice is the exception, not the rule, and that works which impress editors are not being dismissed for trivial reasons.

Secondly, I have yet to meet an author who did not have a love-hate relationship with his own writing. The fear that nothing one writes is adequate usually goes hand in hand with the knowledge that you are doing a better job than a number of people who have been published. But love of one's own work does tend to bias one when flipping through titles at the bookstore, doesn't it?

*And then there's a third category, a small band of chest-thumping writers who never got any farther than an e-book, almost exclusively in the SciFi sector. To the unsuspecting novice, they may make it look as if they have actually achieved something, enough to elevate them to the status of now being a publishing expert. Theirs is a parade that deserves to be rained on. In the book industry, **being published as an e-book writer amounts to not being published at all.***

I find it laughable that this author condemns the current publishing system for resisting change and not accepting talented, unknown authors while at the same time criticizing those who try to take advantage of the same new technologies. Ebooks – and print on demand technology, for that matter – are no less valid methods of publication than traditional printing (and both are significantly more environmentally friendly, I might add). Both technologies would offer great opportunities to writers and publishers, if both groups were willing to work together to harness them. Ebooks and POD provide publisher with the means to test novice authors without as much risk, meaning that more money and effort can be devoted to marketing those titles and building a fanbase.

The problem here does not lie with authors, but with the publishers who take advantage of them. As pointed out in the article, most who fall prey to the ebook/POD scams are the uninitiated, those who have never been published and do not understand the industry or the differences between Bantam, Harper-Collins, and IUniverse. Some may condemn them for not researching how the entire system works, but why should they? Computer programmers don't need to know how to manufacture hardware; fighter pilots don't have to know how to service engines or purify jet fuel. These writers have no reason to doubt the word of their 'publisher'; to them, their book is just as valid as any traditionally printed book. And it should be!

Two things make ebooks and POD publishers unpopular. The first is that change represents a threat to an established system, and many of the middlemen in the publishing world fear that these new production methods mean the end of their businesses. They may be right, but in my opinion, that is not reason enough to shun the technology altogether, and pressure from wholesalers, book printers, and anyone else should be ignored in order to strike the best balance between profit and the production of quality literature.

Second, and perhaps more importantly, is that when traditional publishers hesitated, less reputable people took advantage of these technologies. For a fee, anyone could have their works published, regardless of quality, content, or style. In one way, that's a good thing; everyone has just as much of a right to get their ideas out. But production of any work, no matter how poorly conceived, coupled with a complete disregard for editing and presentation, tarnished both ebooks and POD printing from the outset. The industry

now views both technologies as anathema, a way for untalented writers to bypass the 'strict guidelines and standards' of the established order.

Perhaps these brazen authors need to be enlightened, but they do not need to be humiliated.

*But what is wrong with the other loudmouths, the ones who looted, leeches, or plagiarized their way to local stardom? What's wrong with them is that they claim a mantle of expertise about writing or being a writer in general that they don't possess. Many unpublished authors wrote a much better, and much more original, book than they did, and they know it.*

Plagiarized? Does our friend refer to the Star Trek writer here, or to the Fantasy-thief? Either way, I think plagiarized is too harsh a word; too harsh for the simple fact that, were there any idea stealing going on, lawsuits would be flying like a locust plague, and I have heard no rumors of such a thing. When an author is asked to write a book, be it Star Trek, Forgotten Realms, Babylon 5 or any of a thousand other franchise-based novels, it is not plagiarism. It's work for hire. If he were not asked, he would never be able to publish the book. That's why there is such an outcry about fan fiction on the Internet; these people have not been authorized to write about their favorite characters, and some say they should not have the right to.

And for all you fantasy thieves out there, writing about Lothlorien or Harry Potter is plagiarism; writing about an elven tree city or a boy wizard is not. One can only plagiarize specific things, not general concepts. Remember when Babylon 5 and Deep Space 9 came out? There *were* a number of suits filed then; the B5 folks claimed that the Star Trek people had stolen their idea. Neither show was taken off the air though. Why? Because one cannot claim copyright on a station in space, and enough differences existed – such as names, species, and locations – to make the works separate entities. And thankfully, too, otherwise we'd have nothing left to talk about!

*Once [these authors] start calling themselves author advocates, beware.*

Ah, back to the point.

*There are a few serious experts in authorland, there's no doubt about that. Christian author advocate Sally Stuart is one of them. Dan Poynter of Para Publishing is another. And there's John Kremer, a guy who more than anyone else knows the portals and pitfalls of being successful in writing.*

Ironically, none of these examples are SF writers, though Dan Poynter did write an interesting book on parachuting. Why, then, the diatribe on the evil SF advocate? Did Asimov and Tolkien steal his lunch money when they were kids?

*Who not to trust? Every one who effectively attempts to keep you from being published. That's right, that's what they try to do, keep you away from their ranks.*

The article writer then goes on to list all of the things these evil advocates do, (i.e. listing scammers, ill-reputable agents and publishers, etc.) and he points out that all of those things are valid and necessary. He then criticizes those same advocates for scaring away the competition and only recommending the big publishers, those with whom an author has virtually no chance of publication.

The fact of the matter is that breaking into this business is difficult, and the odds are stacked against success. While some author advocates may seem to be advocating a different hobby, I think their warning is a valid one. If you love to write, write. If you want to be a famous writer, good for you, but be ready for a lot of rejection, and do your homework. You are not going to be handed success on a silver platter, you will have to fight for it every step of the way. Your options are many, and each decision will have ramifications you will not foresee.

A good number of freelance agents, book editors, and even publishers are illegitimate, and all of them are in this business to make money, not to wantonly waste it helping writers who may or may not be able to market themselves. Research potential associates first, and don't be afraid to ask them tough questions or request referrals. There are a number of publications and web sites which help catalogue scammers; of course, most are run by other authors and/or publishers. You know, the ones who are just trying to scare you away from writing!

Choosing a publisher can be more difficult. With small presses, an author may have a better chance of getting serious consideration, but small presses have limited resources, so getting published by them is nearly as hard as getting published by the big boys. Small presses are more willing to try new technologies, POD for example, and more power to them, I say, but research your decision before signing any contracts, and I would recommend having a clause in your contract that stipulates a switch to traditional printing

if sales reach a certain point. Most wise publishers would adopt this hybrid strategy on their own, but sometimes the risk and expense of an offset print run can be a good deterrent.

Even if accepted by a smaller house, authors face two serious problems. First, small houses are not as respected in the industry as big houses, and they do not carry as much clout. It is more difficult for them to get titles carried by wholesalers and placed in bookstores. The author, not the publisher, always does the bulk of marketing, but expect a harder fight if you are associated with an independent or unknown press. Second, small publishers will not be able to pay as much as a big house can (Note: can, not will) and many authors are already underpaid for their work. Even still, smaller houses may be the best bet for the new author; they are often willing to negotiate more and authors retain a greater amount of control.

If an author wants instant, worldwide acceptance by the book publishing industry, and tons of money, he will probably want to place his bets on a big house. It's a long shot, but if those publishers can be convinced of an author's ability, they can put vast resources at his disposal and strong-arm the industry into placing the titles. They will, however, take full creative control of the work and the bulk of whatever profit is to be made. And I agree with our writer on one final point, at least: good luck with those submissions and let me know what they say three years from now.

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## Sci-Fi Summer Fare

(Upcoming SF movies and their release dates)

Shrek II	May 21st
Day After Tomorrow	May 28th
Harry Potter III	June 4th
Chronicles of Riddick	June 11th
The Stepford Wives	June 11th
Around the World in 80 Days	June 18th
Darkness	June 18th
Kaena: The Prophecy	June 25th
Spider-Man II	July 2nd
King Arthur	July 9th
I, Robot	July 16th
Catwoman	July 23rd
Donnie Darko	July 23rd
The Village	July 30th
Alien vs Predator	August 13th
Anacondas	August 27th