



The *Illuminata*

Delving Deep Into The Worlds of Science Fiction and Fantasy

Character Profiling (Part I): Groups

By Bret Funk

Characters are the pivot points around which novels revolve. It is not the fate of the world that readers worry about, but rather the fate of the characters in the world. Characters who seem real, ones with strengths, weaknesses, vices and virtues, attract readers and help take a story from ordinary to outstanding. Weaker characters, those who are driven by the plot instead of driving it, those who neither offer anything new to the work nor show individuality, condemn the work to the bowels of mediocrity.

Generating unique characters is one of the most difficult aspects of writing, and doing so without creating a work long enough to make an encyclopedia jealous can seem impossible. Nevertheless, it is an essential goal, one that all writers should devote a great deal of effort toward. But how does one create a multitude of characters without ruining the pace of the work or boring the reader with details?

Ironically, the answer to this question lies in the direction opposite the goal: to create unique characters without wasting unnecessary space, writers can use

groups—race, nationality, or any of a number of other classification methods.

Knight... Carpenter... Elf... Witch... Gangster... Taken alone, these words evoke a myriad of images, and by using them, a writer can draw on his readers' previous experiences with a given group, sparing him the need to define that group in great detail. By using existing groups, a writer need only explain how his vision *differs* from a reader's preconceptions. It is not important to say that a knight values honor and chivalry above all else; that is incumbent upon all

knights. It is, however, important to point out that one's knight does *not* value those things, or that a knight's chivalric code does not extend to women, gnomes, or some other sub-population of the world. Including a descriptive word or two adds an extra layer of complexity. A damsel would not be inclined to seek help from the Black Knight, but she would have fewer reservations asking the White Knight for assistance. Similarly, one would be less afraid to fight a paper golem than a stone one, though both are fearsome foes. Descriptors can delineate differences in attitude, culture, ideology or physical composition, and adding them implies intricacy even when the writer has not actually fleshed out the details. Moreover, qualifiers function even when the reader does not understand the difference. One does not have to know what makes a Sylvanesti Elf different from a Qualinesti Elf to know that there is a distinction, and once readers know two or more groups exist, they will unconsciously look for reasons why, and sometimes even fabricate those reasons on their own.

Every group a character belongs to provides additional information, so by combining groups, a writer can draw a detailed picture without relying heavily on description. Even with only a handful of different groupings, a near infinite number of possibilities come into being. A religious, aristocratic, Elven landowner is a far different character than an atheist, bourgeois, Dwarven nomad. Using dichotomous classes is easiest, but by finding or designing groups with more than two categories, additional variation is possible.

The danger in using groups to define a character lies in stereotypes. The goal is to create a world real enough to make readers believe in it, and that cannot happen if everyone looks and acts the same. Grouping should only serve to make characters appear similar at a macro level; once the story reaches the level of the individual, variation must exist between all characters in order for the world to be believable. For example, a group of Elves should only look identical when compared to a group of Humans or Dwarves.

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RPG Corner v3.4: Elements of Good Scenarios – Settings and Props

by Doug >|< Roper of EPIC Gaming

While token descriptions of the PCs immediate environments are all well and good, a GM who limits the role of setting to a quick and dirty recap of the bar that the PCs are sitting in is not using the element to its full potential. Sadly, setting is often overlooked and underused by GMs who are too quick to get to the encounter or discovery. Likewise, props and handouts can add gobs of information and enrichment to Role-Playing Games, but tend to be neglected because of the time it may take to generate them. This month's article takes a look at both of these elements, and suggests ways to employ them for maximum benefit.

Setting

Setting covers everything from the time and technology level in which an RPG takes place to the physical description of the room that your PCs wake up in at the start of the adventure. Because it exists in so many different ways, it is sometimes easier for a GM to take a few shortcuts in their use of setting. Placing games in a modern setting, with comparable technology to ours here in the real world is a shortcut. Everyone knows the look and feel of our world from a lifetime of experience with it, so no time or energy needs to be wasted describing things to PCs. A few well-chosen words can conjure the necessary mental pictures. That's well and good for "present day" games, but games that take place in more fantastic settings are a different matter all together. You would think that great care would be taken with the fabrication and description of fantastic settings, but in my opinion this isn't really the case.

Setting, and the use of it, must transcend a simple description of the characters' environment. That doesn't mean that proper descriptions are not a good use for setting. If handled properly, good description and attention to detail can contribute to creating the mood or texture of a scene without the characters having any kind of inkling what the scene will hold. Characters walking into a new building is boring and doesn't reveal much. Characters walking into a shining skyscraper decked out in chrome and glass, with armed security and surveillance all over is not quite as boring. It also establishes the nature of the building, and depending on the PC's reasons for entering it, can be a foreshadowing tool.

Setting can also be used to limit the PCs. Let's say

that the PCs are actually from the far distant future. By placing an encounter with some baddies in a public venue, you limit the PCs by preventing them from using their super technology. The same encounter occurring in an abandoned warehouse will turn out very different than in the previous example. How tension filled would an encounter between the heroes and the villain be in a secluded villa far away from everything? The same encounter in a busy airport, or on a ferry ride across a bay will add tons of tension and complicating factors (assuming the PCs care about preserving innocent life).

Lavish detail heaped upon a setting will make it very easy for the PCs to visualize and remember a location. Holding important or personally moving scenes at that location will endear it to the PCs, the same way that many of us, even now, look fondly back on our old high school building. GMs can further this connection to a place by continually bringing characters back to it for various reasons. The PCs may spend a lot of time in the full course of their playing visiting different locations and exotic places, but having an unchanging and steady place to return to every now and then will breed a familiarity with the place that will draw the players deeper into the game. Familiar settings need not be pleasant ones, either. Revisiting a familiar spooky or dangerous place increases the stakes for characters, who have some prior knowledge of the risk that they are in, and thus the overall level of tension in the game rises and players are once again sucked in, hanging on the GM's every word (which is the best place for them to be).

Lastly, the setting for a particular scene or scenario can actually become a character in itself, if it is used correctly. Most times, settings are treated as antagonists. This is an old literary technique (think *Call of the Wild* or *Cast Away*) that creates conflict with the environment that the character or characters find themselves in. These can be powerful stories, especially for more mundane PC types, who have no particular resilience or easy means of escape. The wide, wild world is a very unforgiving place, and one that most characters would not be ready for if they were suddenly stranded. Every twig snapping, every river crossing and every dark cave or wood-fall can be either salvation or destruction.

Con't on page 11

Dennis Lynch, Science Fiction Collector (Part II)

by Terry Crotinger/montanasing

"I have a wide range of interests and see collecting as a link to the past. I want to open others' eyes to things they don't understand." Dennis Lynch, April 10, 2004.

One thing that surprised me about Dennis Lynch, collector of science fiction and eclectic treasures, was learning that Anime was a low priority in his hierarchy of collecting. He feels it is for more juvenile audiences. "I don't like the posturing that goes on." But he does enjoy Manga, possibly because it is closer to a comic book format. Story lines that solve a problem or mystery and allow the character to develop and grow are preferred.

He collects models, comics, paperbacks, movies (VHS, DVD, 16mm), anthologies, series, manga, fanzines, action figures and movie props—from the fantastic to the trivial. Denny's collection is anything but trivial. It is not a haphazard grouping of items on display. Denny's designated collection room is filled from floor to ceiling with bookcases crammed full of magazine boxes, containing carefully stored, alphabetized and categorized items. If there is an article about a certain series, he collects it and has about four hundred scrapbooks on SF, Fantasy and Horror films, animation and Television.

"Simple toys weren't enough anymore. I wanted my mind to be challenged into adulthood. This became special because it was not available. But this," he says, waving his arms expansively, inviting you to look closer, is "my stuff. Mine. My stuff." He explained, "It's not about owning the junk. It's the information, the decision making with good reasoning behind the item." As much as owning, it is *the process of collecting* that hooked him into this activity at an early age. He smiles proudly and scans the vault-like room with eyes that are, even as we speak, looking at folders and scrapbooks he has developed like an enamored parent would with pictures of their child. This man obviously loves what he does.

A highlight in his collecting career was meeting Forest Ackerman, number one fan of science fiction. Their conversation, of course, turned to collecting. Forest Ackerman has *seen* Dennis's collection and Denny is still thrilled that his role-model in collecting gave a positive nod to what he has collected through the years. He is so thrilled, he rattles off these facts about the man faster than I can document them: Forest Ackerman was given the "First Number One Fan Personality" award in 1953, and in 1996 (for the year 1946), he was given a *Hugo* for "Fan Writer". The *Science Fiction Achievement Award*TM, also known as the *Hugo Award*[®], is given annually by the World Science Fiction Society[®] (WSFS[®]) at World-Con."

Careful research usually precedes the buying of an item, though sometimes, Lynch admits he's bought things on a whim. Every collector can be an impulse buyer. Lynch's strategy is to comb through one or more of fifteen reference periodicals that appeal specifically to collectors. One is called PREVIEWS, a "monthly guide to upcoming comic books, magazines, toys, games, clothes, videos, books, art, etc. It can be purchased at most comic book stores. It advertises items coming out two months later." Another periodical he relies on is, The Scott Catalogue. In fact, he is a contributor to The Scott Catalogue. Not limited to film, he also checks television, comic, stamp (five stamp journals at last count) and "special effects" magazines when thinking of purchasing an item. And, of course, there are the more common methods like going to Barnes & Nobles, eBay, Fan specialty stores and conventions.

Classifying and keeping his collection is a monumental task. With over twenty years of collecting, starting with the Iowa City Film series—needing to categorize and index everything from publicity stills to advertising—Lynch has tried to keep his records updated. He maintains that is has become almost impossible to keep his records current without a full time job doing just that.

Denny cautions when selecting a place to store items, "beware of the elements," specifically moisture, heat, mildew, bugs and animal damage. "Waterbed leaks," he immediately interjects with a knowing look. "Direct sunlight," he adds to his list of nasties that could ruin a lifetime of work.

His books are sorted by size using adjustable shelving units. This method fluctuates because he separates them into categories. But ones used most often, he advises, need to be within easy reach and must have easy access to rows and shelves and display cases of items. "It must be accessible." He stresses using the right kind of plastic to store literature in and absolutely avoids using tape. And one rule he unswervingly maintains: He Does Not Loan! (Don't bother to ask.)

Some of his favorite items:

Famous Monsters of Filmland magazine. All the production information "made movies accessible to kids". A *Planet of the Apes* book, one of the first books on production he acquired in 1968. A "Marvin the Martian" original drawing. "The Marvin picture was drawn for me by his creator, former Warner animator, Chuck Jones, during a visit to Cedar Rapids in the early 1980s. He appeared at a local animation art business, Gallery Lainzberg."

Con't on page 10

The Writer's Block: Before You Submit, Don't Forget!

by Charles Gramlich

Before mailing, or emailing, a story off, there are some things to check one last time. If errors are present and you don't find them, then the editor certainly will. And he or she may hold them against you when it comes time to send you either a check or a rejection slip.

This month's article consists primarily of a list of those things that need to be checked. Try to compare each of your stories against it. The results should be fewer errors, and more sales.

Checklist: Put a check beside each step as you complete it.

1. Give the story a final proofreading just for mechanical errors, which includes word by word, sentence by sentence checking of grammar, spelling, and punctuation. You're not reading for story here, but for mechanics. Some people like to read backward at this point so they won't get caught up in the story line. It would be great if, after finishing a piece, you could let it sit for a few days or more before giving it the final proofing. This makes it much easier to catch mistakes.

2. Check your fonts. Most magazines like to see submissions in 12 point type in either Courier New or Times New Roman. Unless the publication specifies, go with one of these two rather than some fancier font. I write in 14 point type because it's easier to see, but I always change it before I send the story off.

3. Check your format. Include your name, contact information and a word count at the top of your submission, and make your margins about 1 inch all around. Make your text flush with the left margin but let it be ragged on the right. Pay special attention to page numbers and headers. I've forgotten page numbers in email submissions but I wouldn't advise it. Typically, you start numbering pages on page 2. Also, there should be a "header," your name and a short phrase from your title, at the top of every page from page 2 on.

4. Double-check the magazine's submission requirements. Different magazines require different things so make sure that what you submit is exactly what the guidelines ask for. If they say "no email submissions," they mean it.

5. Although not one of the most important tasks, do check to see that you've spaced properly after periods, commas, and other forms of punctuation.

6. When you're physically mailing a story, you should read the final printed copy out loud to yourself one last time. This will help in proofreading and will also ensure that you haven't lost a paragraph somewhere, or perhaps transposed a couple of pages. It happens all the time.

7. Make a personal hard copy of the finished story and put it where you can find it again, or make multiple backup copies, either on disk or on a different computer from the one where your original is stored. Someday, somehow, your computer is going to crash. Don't lose everything you've written. I have a friend who had most of a novel completed when her computer was stolen. Over 300 manuscript pages gone. And she had no backup. She quit writing.

8. If possible, address your story, via a cover letter, personally to the editor. They like to see their names, too. Guidelines will usually give you the editor's name, and these can often be found online or from looking at a copy of the magazine.

9. Don't forget the SASE. If you're physically mailing something, include a self addressed, stamped envelope with your submission. Otherwise, you probably won't get the story back, or even hear from the magazine again.

10. Start something new. Don't wait to get an acceptance or a rejection on one story before starting a new project.

11. If a story gets rejected, get it back in the mail, or out by email, as soon as possible. Keep your stories in circulation. They can't earn you money hanging around at home.

I hear someone's having a birthday this month, a second birthday. And though that ain't much in the lifespan of a Galapagos tortoise, it's pretty good for an online newsletter. Congratulations to *The Illuminata* and to Bret Funk who has been just crazy enough to make it work. And congratulations to all the contributors over the last two years. I think we've done good.

– Charles Gramlich

Reviews

Apocalypse Burning

Mel Odom



Tyndale, Sep 2004, \$14.99

ISBN: 1414399336

Review by Harriet Klausner

The disappearance of millions of people around the globe which includes all the children under twelve years old fails to stop the latest Middle East flare-up. When Syrian forces attack the Turkish city of Sanliurfa US Ranger Captain Cal Remington

vows that this engagement will not derail his career so he eagerly accepts help from the soon to be appointed Secretary General of the United Nations Nicolae Carpathia, who sends his minion to abet the ambitious American soldier. First Sergeant Samuel Adams "Goose" Gander realizes that his friend has aligned himself with the forces of evil, but has no idea what he can do about this but he is not willing to give up on Cal.

Goose is unaware that at Fort Benning, Georgia fighters are skirmishing in a different battlefield. His son Chris is one of the children that vanished and his stepson Joey is nowhere around. His wife Meg, a post counselor is being charged with dereliction of duty for failing to inform an abusive father that his son was hospitalized; depriving him of their last minutes together. He plans to sue Meg and the Army in civil court if she is found guilty.

Apocalypse Burning follows the trials and tribulations of Goose and Meg as they cope with war, the disappearance of their child, and forces that want to destroy them. Goose remains an admirable leader of soldiers especially in contrast to Cal who will use murder to further his career. Using two fronts and a global backdrop, Mel Odom has written an exciting war and legal thriller that focuses on two decent people trying to do the right thing in a world heading towards its final countdown.

Writers Wanted

The Illuminata is looking for talented writers seeking to improve their craft or share their ideas on speculative fiction. We are currently accepting occasional and regular contributions. For more information, interested parties should visit our website or e-mail us at:

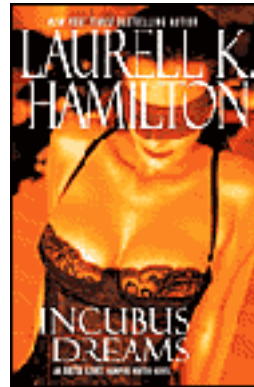
Illuminata@TyrannosaurusPress.com

The most exciting phrase to hear in science, the one that heralds new discoveries, is not 'Eureka!' but 'That's funny ...'

- Isaac Asimov

Incubus Dreams

Laurell K. Hamilton



Berkley, Oct 2004

\$23.95, Hardcover 672 pp.

ISBN: 0425198243

Review by Harriet Klausner

On an alternate earth vampires and shapeshifters exist with the same legal rights as mortals. Vampires who break the law can be killed as soon as a federal marshal, who is a vampire executioner, catches them. One

of the most feared vampire executioners is Anita Blake, a necromancer whose powers just keep growing thanks to the triumverate she is part of. The other two members are St. Louis master vampire Jean-Claude and Richard the werewolf, who desperately wants to be human again.

A group of vampires, one of them a master vamp sneaked into the city unnoticed; they are killing strippers so the Regional Preternatural Investigative Team of which Anita is a member is assigned the case. When Anita is not looking for the rogue master vampire, she somehow forges a new triumverate in which she is the master and the vampire and the shapeshifter add their powers to hers. Richard, Anita and Jean-Claude try again to make the triumverate work because they know the whole is greater than the individual parts.

The heroine's life is obviously never boring as she jumps from one lover to another and one crime scene to the next one always knowing this could be her last leap. Anita Blake is one of the most original characters around and she remains as fresh as if this is her first appearance. *Incubus Dreams* is highly erotic with plenty of sex scenes that add to the plot and the prime player as it enables the audience to see her growing power and its impact on her two lovers. This gender bender will appeal to romance, fantasy, and mystery and of course horror fans.

Reviews

The Superlative Man

Herbert Thomas



1997

\$22.00, Hardcover, 248 pgs

ISBN: 0-374-27209-3

Review by D. L. Parker

It used to be that science fiction was pretty well defined in readers' minds. You had no trouble recognizing it during science fiction's Golden Age: it had Martians and robots

and starships and HAL, and everyone recognized the names. Once van Vogt and Asimov and Dick and Heinlein passed on, things got fuzzier. We even call it speculative fiction now. Does the genre include Michael Crichton and others of his ilk who write the thrillers du jour? I bet Crichton's publishers and agents would press their lips hard if we labeled *Jurassic Park* science fiction. The term's more than a little pejorative to most of those involved in cranking out those books that open on the bestseller list. Just look out on the Internet and see how many of those large literary agencies hang out a *No Stinking Science Fiction Writers Need Apply* shingle right below their names. Somehow they've neatly separated Michael Crichton and Stephen King and, yes, Mary Shelly and Aldous Huxley and George Orwell too on their side of the fence, though these authors are just as much writers of speculative fiction as Edgar Rice Burroughs or Leigh Brackett or Marion Zimmer Bradley. Where does one draw the line between what is called a thriller and one of those weird science fiction things, destined never to be on the bestseller list? Oops...I think I've answered my own question here!

The Superlative Man is one of those novels that I suspect neither its publisher nor its author would call speculative fiction. It is, though, all the same. The *noir* world that cub reporter Harvey Gardner inhabits never existed, not even between the pages of Hammet or Chandler. The Superlative Man of the story is a flying superhero, a Superman stereotype in the classic red cape that performs the usual astonishing feats of rescue. Gardner reads all about them in next day's screaming headlines. *Airplane saved from fatal crash! Child rescued from burning building by Our Hero!* Sound familiar so far?

But this is a noir world. As the story opens, the Superlative Man has just caused the accidental death of Gardner's elderly parents. En route to another rescue, the zooming crusader flashes past their windscreen. Fatally distracted, the old couple drives off the cliff to their death. Harvey Gardner never forgets it, though to the world, it's just one small unfortunate accident...the next day new headlines dazzle them into forgetfulness. *Woman tied to railroad is rescued by the Superlative Man!* And so on.

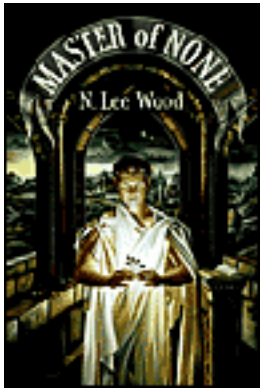
Gardner, now a young reporter languishing on human interests stories in Section B, gets an opportunity to expand his career through what seems to be another tragic accident. His mentor, old Martin Gale, dies unexpectedly. Martin croaks while investigating a series of overdose deaths tied to a shady nightclub called High Water. Funny... the people who've died have more than drugs as their connection. They were all rescued by the Superlative Man. Gardner, handed Martin's old assignment for possibly ambiguous reasons, feels all the old ambivalent feelings toward the superhero once more. Could it be...could it really be...that some of these rescues, these daring double rescues, be...staged? Gardner's soon hot on the trail. He finds himself falling into a classic noir nightmare as he tries to untangle the threads: drugs and mickey finns; hallucinations and deadly dames; friends who might just be more dangerous to his life than enemies and enemies who just might be heroes in disguise...and a trail that might lead him, ultimately, to a tormented superhero.

The Superlative Man is a refreshing spin on the superhero myth portrayed so endlessly and one-dimensionally in popular culture. Imagine Superman thrown into the poisonous world of *The Big Sleep* and you'll get an idea. Is even the Caped Crusader going to emerge with his cape still shining? Anyone familiar with noir conventions knows the answer, but gray makes for a more interesting color scheme than black and white any day. And while lacking the depth and intensity of the greatest noir classics, *The Superlative Man* and its sparse, elegant prose is still a worthy addition to the tradition.

And at the risk of alarming the author, publisher, and agent, I say it is speculative fiction too, if only to accommodate my weakness for the noir genre and get this review into this column. Readers, if you're not afraid to enter the shadows...enjoy the night!

Reviews

Master of None N. Lee Wood



Aspect, Sep 2004
\$14.95, Trade Paper. 389 pgs.
ISBN: 0446693049
Review by Harriet Kausner

In the distant future, mankind has colonized many planets, but it is the Nine Families of Vanar that control the worms, artifacts made and abandoned by an ancient race that enables female pilots to fly to three hundred systems reducing interstellar distances. The Vanar take other ships with them as they traverse the universe with their monopoly. On the planet itself the women citizens are the ruling class while the men are slaves needed to help produce the next generation females.

Ambitious botanist Nathan Crewe convinces a space pilot to take him to Vanar where he plans to pick specimens to prove his theory. The authorities catch him within an hour of landing and inform him he will never leave. Nathan is adopted by one of the powerful Nine Families and is forced to marry into one of the Nine Families. Although he is less than chattel, Nathan feels Vanar is home and begins a legal fight to make changes to the social caste system.

Master of None is an in depth look at a society in which women hold all power while men need permission to simply leave the house, are unable to attend university, or hold a job beyond breeder. Nathan coming from the outside thinks initially the planet is backwoods, but begins to change his mind as he gets to know people. Could he be suffering from the Stockholm syndrome or just believe that Vanar is home? He wants to make change so that his gender has rights paralleling much of the civil rights movement. Women on Varna are not evil or deliberately cruel; instead they have been raised to believe they are superior. This is a masterful science fiction tale that cleverly spotlights social inequities.

What a privilege it is to work with such talented staff! Starting the Short Story contest was brilliant, too. I'm looking forward to another memorable year. Best wishes, Illuminata!

– montanasings/TerryCrotinger

Congratulations to *The Illuminata* on this, her second anniversary. I'm proud to have had the opportunity to contribute to this wholly worthwhile enterprise. Thanks to creator and editor-in-chief, Bret M. Funk, *The Illuminata* has raised the bar on speculative fiction webzines from its inception. Long may she last.

– garrie keyman

The Mountain's Call Caitlin Brennan



Luna, Sept 2004
\$13.95, Trade Paper, 400 pgs.
ISBN 0373802102
Review by Harriet Klausner

She heard the Call of the Mountain but Valeria's mother refused to believe it because in one thousand years, only men have answered the summons. Her mother warded her so she could not use her magic but still

Valeria found a way to leave her home and head for the mountain where the gods in the form of white stallions live. She travels with a caravan and among their number is Euan Rohe, a Caletanni barbarian being held hostage for the behavior of his tribe. The barbarians do not want to be part of the Aurelian Empire but for now Evan and his allies work in the shadows, getting ready to make their move.

Valeria pretends to be a boy while she takes the test to see if she can be a Rider. The Ladies call her, the stallions accept her but the men reject her once they find out she is a female even though she is the most powerful horse mage they have ever seen. First Rider Kerrec takes her under his wing but both he and Valeria are kidnapped by Euan and his allies. Valeria sacrifices herself to save Kerrec but she doesn't believe she can betray the Empire for the love of one man.

Caitlin Brennan is a fantastic world builder who creates a world where magic is an everyday occurrence. The white stallions are able to work time and fate to see the possible futures that may happen to the empire. The bond between rider and stallion is comparable to that of dragon and rider in Anne McCaffrey's Pern series. There is plenty of action and romance in this spellbinding romantic fantasy.

Reviews

The Fresco Sheri S. Tepper



EOS, 2000
\$24.00, Hardback, 406 pgs
ISBN: 0-380-97879-2
Review by D. L. Parker

Sheri S. Tepper's book "The Fresco" reminds of one of those poisonous family arguments. You know the kind I'm talking about. Let's say it's a holiday, and the extended family has gathered from all around the country. There's old Granny by the fire repeating all those really awful old church jokes that make you wince. Voices are booming and the level in the punch bowl is sinking fast. Ah, there's Uncle Roscoe, your second youngest uncle, the one you've been arguing with about this or that since you were a little kid. Let's see, last year you had this heated discussion on the nature of civilization. The faults of the incumbent made for another lively discussion. You're looking forward to your next great round with Uncle Roscoe.

Only it isn't going so well this time. Hey, we must have hit a hot button! Uncle Roscoe's face is turning red and he's about to snap his wine stem. And while you're thinking to yourself, *everyone has a right to his or her opinion, it's just a philosophical difference*, for some reason you're clutching your fork very tightly, and you have this almost irresistible impulse to jab it right into his fat, bigoted, redneck moon face. Why, oh why, were we both so unwise as to let it all hang out this time. Christmas dinner bodes never to be the same.

Sheri S. Tepper lets all her opinions hang out in her book, and personally, I suspect a lot of readers may react the way Uncle Roscoe and I did to each other. Did you ever play a certain game when you were – well, any age? The one entitled "How I Could Improve The World If Only I Were God". It's a nearly irresistible game, if you let yourself start thinking about it in earnest. Even Shakespeare played it (remember the famous "First, let's kill all the lawyers" line?) Gilbert and Sullivan did it too, tongue-in-cheek, in Koko's little patter death-song, "They'll None Of Them Be Missed". Then we have our serious practitioners. *Mao's Little Red Book*. Mayor B.'s new rules, you know, *Smoking Is Verboten Everywhere, Don't Sit On Milk Crates, Pregnant Women Fined for Resting On Steps, Support NYC Through Petty Fines*. Everyone's spent

a few secret moments reforming our political system and removing that neighbor who lets his dog poop on the lawn into the realm of Outer Darkness. The funny thing is, if one really lets go and imagines the world just as one wants it, one always ends up with a vision that would almost certainly mortally offend even one's closest family and friends. Maybe it's best we all keep our collective mouths pursed.

EOS doesn't agree with me, obviously. Under the thin guise of a First Contact story, Sheri S. Tepper expounds her vision of the New World. Benita Alvarez-Shipton is a too-young Hispanic mother from New Mexico with an abusive, drunken, pot-smoking, permanently unemployed husband and a son cut in the same mould. She has a nice daughter who's trying hard to make a go of her life. (Quick: guess how males in general fare in this story?) One afternoon two insectoid aliens meet Benita on her mushroom-gathering expedition. They strike a deal. Benita will be their representative to the world. She gets a lot of money and a message cube. She even gets more than that. The aliens, noting just how messed up years of abuse, her lack of even a high school education, etc. has made her, kindly help her out. A little adjustment is in order. Wow! Benita the Beaten is now the Enlightened One. Suddenly she can talk in complex sentences just like Aaron the Articulate. She can look generals and senators and presidents and all-powerful aliens in the eye on equal terms and straighten them out in no uncertain terms. Why, she's – well, that for-real Hispanic woman we met so briefly is just *gone*. She's become Sheri S. Tepper's mouthpiece.

It's a good thing Benita can talk so lucidly, because she's given a lot to say. The author, I mean the aliens, have big plans for Earth. Never mind that their vision is so Orwellian that G. O. would start looking frantically for Big Brother to hide him if he heard. The aliens (the Pistech and their wasp-like pals, the Inkleozese) are admirably feminist in their views. Those misguided male public figures that espouse pro-life sentiments get mass impregnated by the Inkleozese to teach them a lesson. Thirteen painful months lie ahead, while the implanted spawn get larger and, well, hungrier. Then comes the great chew-out, no anesthetics allowed for fear of endangering the dear little waspy babies. The poor men, those that survive such a trauma sane, go home to a lifetime of taunts. *I was raped!* one victim screams. *Well you must have asked for it* retorts the wife. Sheri, dear...don't you think you were just a little hard on those fellows? For just those philosophical differences?

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And then she addresses those men who lock up their women in long black sacks and windowless upper floors. You know, the entire Islamic world. Besides instantly solving the Palestinian issue, the feminist aliens have a plan for those chauvinistic Muslims too. All of a sudden the women in all the Islamic countries are transformed into hideous trolls. Supposedly they are now *so* ugly their men can't endure the sight of them. Lack of sex incites the sex-crazed males to finally doubt Allah's will. Oh dear, they say, let's reform! (Aristophanes did the same theme a lot better, Sheri, a few thousand years ago). And oh dear, Sheri, it's sure not so simple. I recommend a little book to you, a great and very human story entitled *Guests of the Sheikh*, which might provide you with a hint of insight into the hundreds of years of social, cultural, and religious forces at work in the Islamic world. Certainly not all of those forces are bad. I'm afraid it isn't all the men's fault, and besides, do you think those women are going to thank you for turning them into hideous trolls with knobby noses and plenteous warts? Go back to the blackboard and work on this one please.

I could go on with more examples of the same I-Am-God (God clearly being a She here) reformism run rampant. For example, Benita the Mouthpiece gives religion in general a short shrift. Apparently we humans formed our ideas of God early in our bloody and unenlightened childhood and just outgrew those ideas. Who needs the Old Testament (or Koran) any more? Though interestingly enough, in this story, the Pistech grant every human a colored mark in his or her hand, which sounds strangely like – well, that Beastly Mark; only here's it supposed to be a *good* thing. The fresco referred to in the title, in turn, relates to an incident of nakedly cynical religious manipulation, complete with staged miraculous figures. If a title is a metaphor for a story, *this* title is an unfortunate choice.

I've shorted this review on its plot description because the plot is really subordinate to the New World Imperative Tepper puts forth. There's another set of aliens in the story, a batch of predators (ahem, mostly male) who want to make Earth their private hunting grounds. They have names like Odiferous Tentacles and lots of highly predictable teeth, tentacles, and stinky smells, and they don't do much but provide unintentional comic relief. The Pistech, however, the good guys with the Plan for Earth, are drawn in more depth. What a marvel of organization and harmony their society is. Everyone has a pre-determined

niche, determined by years of genetic selection and careful testing, and if they happen to want to be or do something else, no problem. They're sterilized and exiled to a pretty paradise world called Quirk where they're free to express themselves. When one of those exiles (male, of course) rebels in spite of his cushioned prison and leads an abortive insurrection, order and status quo soon prevail. The poor misguided male gets regressed back to childhood innocence and gently retrained. Mama knows best, son!

I thought long and hard about this book when I finished it. I wish Ms. Tepper had been writing this tongue-in-cheek. But no, her jaw-dropping happy ending appears to be dead serious. The Pistech Plan reforms the World, whether it wants it or not. Benita's newly adjusted, formerly slacker son Carlos starts spouting his eagerness to work. Drugs, those unfashionable veils, outgrown religions, population explosions, and pro-lifers are all evils of the past. Benita the Heroine remarries happily – to one of the insectoid Pistech. (I wonder about those "fluttering mouthparts", really, not something *I'd* want to kiss, but well, each to her own, and thank goodness there is no apparent sex involved). Walk into the rosy sunset, humanity! Or whatever we should call you now that you've been reformed by the Pistech.

I do give the author credit for a thought-provoking book and the courage to speak her mind in a ferociously feminist vision. I give EOS credit for having the guts, or whatever you want to call it, to publish it. Myself, as an editor I might have hesitated to touch it. When folks *really* let it all hang out on How They'd Reform the World, someone *always* gets offended. Even Shakespeare managed to offend a portion of the population in just one line (sorry, lawyers, you can't sue a dead man). So, does Tepper's 406-page vision offend me? I am afraid it does. I'd like to say: please, Pistech: just go away. No miracle solutions.

Still, I must say I would just *love* to include Ms. Tepper among my holiday dinner guests...right across from red-faced, hot-tempered, good old boy Uncle Roscoe. Wow! What a show it would be! It's too bad Uncle Roscoe and I disowned each other forever by the time I was sixteen. Ye who would Reform the World, take heed.

Illuminations Contest Winners will be announced in next month's edition. Read future editions for a sneak peek at this year's winning stories!

Reviews

Gardens of the Moon by Steven Erikson



Tor, May 2004
Hardback, \$24.95, 496 pp.
ISBN: 0765310015
Review by Scott H. Andrews

Although new to the U.S., Steven Erikson's *Malazan Book of the Fallen* saga has been sweeping through Europe since 1999. To date, five Malazan books have been published in Britain and Erikson's native Canada. Tor

published the U.S. edition of the first, *Gardens of the Moon*, in 2004.

Gardens of the Moon is epic fantasy in every way. A massive war grinds through soldiers, mages, and thieves. Gods and "Ascendants," humans or demigods aspiring to divinity, jostle for control of people, cities, ancient magics, and other-worldly dimensions.

Erikson avoids the slow introductory phase of most fantasy by omitting it completely. *Gardens* begins in the middle of the war, with little hint of why it began. Mages hurl bolts of energy with no explanation of the magic system save the power sources called "Warrens," dimensional rifts that cleverly take the characteristics of each type of power. The pace quickens once the action moves to Darujhistan, then slows with divine meddling outside the city. The endgame occurs in the deliciously subtle setting of a masquerade party, but the conclusion resolves only one plot thread.

Gardens moves through several dozen point-of-view characters, but this scope leaves some major ones ignored. Whiskeyjack is absent for a hundred pages after the first sections. After being featured in the Prologue and the first chapter, Paran is absent for two hundred pages in the middle. With demigods scheming and gods walking in mortals' dreams, the human characters feel insignificant. Their actions don't hold much weight when demigods wield soul-stealing swords and dead human characters are brought back to life by sorcery or divine will.

Most of these myriad characters are vividly drawn, especially the jester Kruppe. Only a few have interesting motivations, such as Whiskeyjack's angst about the war and Rake's concern for his people. Except for Paran's conclusion and a thief who falls in love, no character develops through the novel. They scheme and react, they fight, they die and come back from the dead, but they never grow.

Erikson's world is richly drawn, but the narrative never explains the current motivations of the Malazan Empire. The point-of-view stumbles from third-person limited to third-person omniscient, often in the same scenes. The prose moves in curt but brilliantly vivid phrases, especially when describing magic use and the Jaghat barrow.

Erikson invites comparison with the current master of epic fantasy, George R. R. Martin, especially since Tor compares them in their own *Gardens* press release. Although equally epic and detailed as Martin's *Song of Ice and Fire*, Erikson falls short of Martin in believability and characterization. Martin's characters are all realistically drawn; they grow and change. In the absence of meddling gods, their actions have consequences and their deaths are final. Erikson's characters are flat and the humans' actions ring hollow.

Despite this, *Gardens of the Moon* still outpaces almost all other current epic fantasy. Fans of Jordan and Goodkind should definitely read Erikson. They can take comfort that he has planned the Malazan series to end in the tenth book.

Dennis Lynch (con't)

Other little known facts about Dennis Lynch:

He is a charter member of the Iowa Science Fiction organization(s) Mindbridge and the Science Fiction League of Iowa Students.

"I work for money to collect stuff."

The Book Mobile inspired his collecting urge. "I wasn't alone out there."

He teaches "Industrial Technology" for high school students, which includes: drafting, programming, Basic, C++, Network and applied physics.

He has a BA in Film from the University of Iowa.

Like Father—Like Son: His son's Star Wars Lego collection spans one entire wall to the ceiling.

His daughter has been featured in several city-wide productions: The Rocky Horror Show and Cedar Rapids Follies.

Like Daughter—Like Father: "I've done some theater work, some film location work on Iowa based productions; lots of educational TV stuff."

And, ever important, he is married to a very tolerant college administrator!

In October's issue of *Illuminata*, I continue my interview with Dennis Lynch. He advises on financial matters and gives a few last thoughts about the joys of collecting.

Props / Handouts

Props and handouts are a gem when it comes to drawing players into a scenario. When I refer to a prop, I'm speaking of a tangible object that the players (note that I'm saying players here, not characters) can handle and inspect. For example, let's assume that a GM's players are enjoying a RPG set in the 1920's, where they play the roles of explorers, seeking the mysteries and riches of equatorial Africa. Now let's suppose that their characters, while searching for a lost associate, come across a golden tusk, and suppose that the GM is able to place that golden tusk right on the table next to the dice, pencils and character sheets. The tusk (a spray painted ceramic replica snatched up at a flea market) will draw the players in, giving them a physical connection to the make believe world that they all choose to inhabit for a few hours a week.

The players are able to touch and inspect the object just as their characters would be in the stifling heat and humidity of the Dark Continent. In another scenario, that ceramic tusk could be a dragon tooth, or the key to a lost city. Props simply serve to form a bridge that the players can easily navigate to the same place that their characters inhabit. They can be anything the GM wants to provide (assuming that the objects are safe to handle. I think it goes without saying, but I can't be too sure with so many wacky kids out there, so I'll say it anyway. Avoid dangerous objects as props! No knives, swords, komodo dragons, firearms or dangerous chemicals should be handled! Duh!)

Handouts are somewhat simpler to provide, and are mainly (in my mind) things that can be printed out or drawn, and read or viewed by the characters. Newspaper articles, letters, journal entries, notes scribbled on scrap paper, drawings of places and people, lists, and anything else that can provide a clue for the playing-characters count as a handout. The benefit of this type of prop is twofold. Firstly, the GM doesn't have to read the material, where his own inflection or knowledge of the plot could somehow color the reading, and give away some detail or clue, and it forces the players to make their own conclusions about the documents based on what they know. Secondly, it serves the same function as a prop, in that it creates a link between the players and the imagined actions of their character counterparts.

You can check out some props that I've done on the EPIC Gaming website. My prop gallery is at www.epicgaming.org, click on Gallery, then Props to see some of the stuff that I've done.

On the surface, the Elves will all appear and behave similarly; they have a similar biology and, except in rare circumstances, a similar upbringing. A stranger might have trouble telling one Elf from another, but if that stranger were to share an adventure with the Elves, he should soon notice differences in behavior and belief between each member of his party. No two people are exactly alike, and if variation is not seen between characters, even minor ones, the work will suffer.

Keeping point-of-view in mind is essential when determining the number and degree of differences noted, and the speed at which they are discovered. Going back to our previous example, it might take a Dwarf a long time to notice the individuality of his Elven companions. To him, they're just a bunch of pointy-eared tree-huggers. But to another Elf, one who shares the same physiology and philosophy, differences between these individuals should be more readily apparent.

Groups can give a reader a great deal of knowledge about a character, but those same groups can serve a much greater purpose: to provide a backdrop against which the character's originality can be highlighted. Making one's character an acrophobic Elf or a claustrophobic Dwarf focuses on how they are different from the other members of their group, and those differences are what give a work depth. But differences need not be so dramatic. One might create a teetotaling religious cult with a few members who occasionally enjoy a pint, or a bartender who likes to tell his customers about his problems rather than listen to theirs. Showing subtle differences in attitude ranging in degree from apathetic to fanatical mimics the real world, and by mimicking the real world, a writer makes it easier to relate to his fantasy ones.

Assigning characters to groups helps a writer design complex, realistic worlds. By using preexisting groups, a writer can draw on his readers' memories, limiting the need for detailed descriptions, but even the use of groups unique to a work can imply complexity without requiring the writer to waste pages on narrative. And by employing stereotypes to draw attention to individuality, a writer can use groups to make his characters and his world more believable.

In future articles, I will explore in depth some of the common classification methods used to distinguish characters.