



# The Illuminata

Delving Deep Into The Worlds of Science Fiction and Fantasy

## Beacons, Beacons on the Wall...

By Bret Funk

For those readers expecting an article on the mysteries of the book cover (like I promised), you'll have to forgive me yet again. Events have conspired to keep me from the research required to continue my exploration. Perhaps it would be wise to amend my earlier promise from "in the next few editions" to "sometime in the nebulous future". If this news makes you despondent because you hang on my every word and yearn to learn my opinions on cover design, I can offer the following bits of advice:

- 1) Prepare for the upcoming articles by studying book covers on your own, so that once I do continue, we can engage in lively debate.
- 2) Find a better mentor.

In the meantime, I have decided to complicate my life with the following announcement: Due to the somewhat surprising success of *Beacons of Tomorrow* our recently-released anthology of speculative fiction, we have decided to pursue a second writing contest and subsequent anthology.

Since January, *Beacons* has distinguished itself in two ways. Firstly, it garnered praise from a number of readers and reviewers. Favorable comments have been arriving in my Inbox at a steady trickle, a couple of professional review sites have given the anthology a thumbs up, and a few brave souls (all unrelated to the anthology) have been kind enough to publish their praise online at Amazon.com and the like.

Secondly, *Beacons* has the honor of being Tyrannosaurus Press' first profitable title (though not its only one anymore—if I may toot my own horn for a

moment—as *Jewel of Truth* broke into the black as of this month). That almost the entire project was done *pro bono* certainly helped, but to be honest, I never expected this anthology to recoup the costs that we could not avoid. I figured, at best, it would prove a useful marketing tool and a good way to get the word out about T-Press while helping a few writers get some exposure. Having it succeed at those goals and *exceed* my other expectations more than justifies my decision to produce the anthology in the first place.

So, on the heels of this success, and with the hope that the publication of *Beacons I* will allay writers' fears and spur their interest, I announce the second **Illuminations Speculative Fiction Writing Contest**. The contest will run from July 1, 2006 until December 31, 2006. Barring any unforeseen delays, winning entries will be announced in the April 2007 edition of the *Illuminata*, and work will then begin on *Beacons of Tomorrow Vol. 2*.

Details will soon be available on the T-Press website, but for anyone who can't wait to get started, stories should be 10,000 words or less and must fall into one of the genres of speculative fiction (science fiction, fantasy, horror, alternate reality, etc.). An author may submit as many stories as desired, but there will be a \$5.00 entry fee per story (\$5.50 per story—to cover merchant fees—if paying via Paypal at our website). The entry fee will be used to subsidize this project and future anthologies. Stories will be scored by a panel of judges on a scale of 0-5, and all works scoring 80% or more of possible points will be guaranteed inclusion in the anthology. Stories scoring between 70-80% of possible points will be given suggestions by the judging panel and given the option of rewriting their work for possible inclusion. (Note: The workshopping process was one of the best-regarded features of *Beacons I*, and even winning entries will get feedback from the judges... They just won't be required to act on it to have their stories included).

For those who dislike competition, you may request to submit your story as a submission to the *Illuminata*. A few stories submitted to the *Illuminata* were used to fill out the anthology after all of the winners and runners-up were given their place.

So spread the word to your writing friends, limber up your fingers, blow the dust off your keyboard, and let the contest begin!

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# The RPG Corner v5.2 Designing New Races - Culture

by Doug >|< Roper of EPIC Gaming

Last month I talked about fabricating new races to populate your RPGs (or fiction writing) and the processes by which you could get these new races, starting from flour or borrowing them from existing sources and modifying them to your tastes. I also talked a bit about the shapes that the new races would take, and applying the Rule of Why in reverse to get the physiology you want for good reasons. This month, I want to look at culture, how it can be broken down into easy to handle pieces, why it's important, and how it can be used to make even tired old races seem new and vibrant.

So, what is culture? The broad definition of culture as supplied by the constantly useful dictionary.com is "*The totality of socially transmitted behavior patterns, arts, beliefs, institutions, and all other products of human work and thought.*" That may seem like a whole lot of information and in fact it is, but for our purposes culture can be broken down into elements that can be manipulated and digested more easily. The elements that I employ in the creation of new races and even in the creation of new populations of an existing race, is as follows (in no particular order):

**Religion** – including rituals, ceremonies and celebrations as well as the beliefs about higher powers and the afterlife. The systems of Morals and Behaviors may coincide with Religion, as in Christianity, but this isn't necessarily the case. Think of the Mesoamerican religions that involved human sacrifice. It is unlikely that the practitioners of the Religion that demanded blood offerings also commanded that they come from friends and neighbors. The Aztecs and Mayans were probably very civil to those they lived with, despite the Religion that they practiced, following a moral code that differed slightly from the religious practice of the population.

**Moral Systems and Rules of Behavior and Official Laws** – These are the ways in which the population behaves towards itself. How the population views right and wrong, good and bad, and what they do about people who do not follow the majority's view. Religion can have a significant impact on this element of culture, but it need not. Hammurabi's Code, one of the first written set of laws on human history, had little to do with religion.

**Attitudes On and Assigning of Gender Roles, and the Roles Assigned to Age groups (kids,**

**teenagers, seniors)** – this is straightforward. What are the men and women expected and/or allowed to do in the culture they live in? What are the expected duties of kids and the aged? The duties of the people in the culture depends heavily on the level of technology that the culture enjoys, or the way in which the leadership is organized. For example, it's not likely that a male dominated society will allow women to serve as protectors or warriors. It's 2006 and the most progressive nation in the world (according to itself) is only recently allowing women to serve in the army in combat capacities.

**Social Organizations and Systems** – Who's in charge of things? How is it all organized, into matriarchies, oligarchies, tribes, clans? What are the systems of ownership and commerce? Is there money, or is it all barter? If there is money, what is that based on? Who cares for the sick? Who enforces the laws, or codes of conduct? Is there an army? How do these people conduct war? Do they even know war?

**Mean Technological Sophistication** – Is the culture hunting and gathering, agrarian, industrial or something else entirely? Are they using machines or magic to make their lives easier? Are they using something else? Animals, plants, silly putty?

**Shared History** – This is very important. Shared history, artifacts, stories, myths, and jokes create an identity for the population you are designing, and that identity can separate the particular culture you are creating from all others. A group of human beings, isolated for a long enough period of time will be unrecognizable to a related group of people if the two were to meet. The events that shape the culture of that isolated group are unique to them, and become part of the history and diversity of the people. These things should be added carefully and sparingly to new cultures you are developing, as even a small event can have vast repercussions.

**Language** – The basic language that is spoken, but also the local dialect, or jargon of a given area or group.

**Artwork and Aesthetic Creations** – What a group creates and beautifies is as particular to a culture as the dialect of the language it speaks. Knowing what is thought to be beautiful and idea in a given group can guide you along architectural and entertainment avenues, refining how the people live, what they do to relax and how they spend their time away from work (assuming there is time away from work).

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# Fandom: Spirituality and the Arts

by Terry Crotinger/montanasing

Fandom, like a well-cut gem, has many facets. There is a Dark and Light side—the Yin/Yang of humanity. There is also a surprising spirituality, often reflected in the Jedi-like Dark/Light battle of good vs. evil. Most of sci-fi's (science fiction, speculative fiction) spiritual side is positive or at least neutral, embracing organized religion, cults, New Age, fringe groups, atheists and agnostics. There are radical free thinkers who take the lower road, but thankfully, they are rare. Let me speak about these first.

Spirituality—the Dark side. Cults tend to be more restrictive in freedom of thought and find ways to enforce this with their membership. This is universal with cults, so no surprise here. What I was surprised to learn was about a group called the Luciferians who believe their namesake is from another world and created humans by manipulating our DNA. The only way to communicate with Lucifer is to develop a special part of our human brain. Sounds like speculative fiction to me. In this Da Vinci Code era, discovering another obscure cult was fantastic—in the literal sense. The *Illuminati* are also a secret cult/society with futuristic, speculative leanings. I won't give an opinion on the validity of any of these, but I do lean toward Americana hedonistic beliefs since that's what I experience in and out of organized religions, cults, New Age... In Fandom, I've experienced this darker quality in films, printed media and usually rpg (an art form, see below). Some would say the use of magic is part of the dark side of the "mind, body, spirit" theory. I'm sure there are evil wizards, vampires, witches and the like loose in the Fandom world since it mirrors the real world. Thankfully, these are not very common.

Spirituality—the Light side. As a coin has many sides, so does fandom in how they express that spiritual part of themselves. Any spiritual aspect in humanity is available in fandom. Some take this very seriously with a rigid belief system. Some keep their perspective open, simplified. One of the strangest facets of this can be seen by the roll model-less generations who find Harry Potter, Lord of The Rings and The Chronicles of Narnia (Silent Hill, Buffy, Star Wars) close to their belief system and practically worship those ideals. Remember the campy cult that popped up around Rocky Horror Picture Show?

Some religions/spiritual beliefs may be part of a fan's personality, but never celebrated within their groups/congregations. I've seen musicians celebrated, socialites and political giants celebrated when they die, but yet to see science fiction included in the eulogy at a funeral. Consider this true story: A fandom friend expressed his sorrow when a friend died. This friend's family held a traditional funeral in a traditional church, completely ignoring the fandom part—her contribution to science fiction and the relationships she had created through her associations. This seemed a travesty to the real-life testimony the girl had with her science fiction friends, many of whom attended the funeral. Instead of celebrating a life, they felt preached to. It was reported they silently endured this then later held their own celebration with song, drink and story. Guess which type of funeral was more healing?

The Arts—Fandom expresses spirituality. Sounds corny, but often true. Since art is expression in symbols, what better commentary could there be to express what often is never uttered, yet heart-felt? In film and print media, our emotions are bent and exploited with the underlying motive to buy. In art, the pure joy of the creation/creating is the reward (in a perfect world). I think fan artists have the truest expression and understanding of what science fiction envisions. They create—costumes, carvings, or comics. One-dimensional or multi-dimensional. It is a behavior—they invent!

Not every fan is an artist nor able to express themselves in artistic thought. It is the *act* of creating, the *act* of dwelling/meditating on the process that often creates its own spirituality. Whether by song or story, pen or brush, cgi or camera, when a fan risks expressing himself through a medium, fandom benefits in unspeakable ways.

Am I a bit passionate about fandom? Yes, unashamedly. I am seized by the acceptance, by the futuristic freethinking of fandom and am intoxicated—I must experience more. Addicted? Hardly. But infatuated? Absolutely. I am in love with science fiction and rejoice when I can play and interact with like-minded people that challenge my knowledge and feed my desire to dream. It *is* a joyous, spiritual occasion for me. Fandom is my soul mate, my sorrow. Universal needs, universal dynamics. Speculate on that!

# The Writer's Block: Writing Groups

by Charles Gramlich

Most folks reading this column are probably interested in writing but are not yet professionals in the field. And that makes this a good place to discuss "writing groups." Are you a member of a group? Should you be?

I wrote for years on my own before I joined a group, and I sold a few stories. The idea of a writing group never even crossed my mind until my first one formed almost by accident. I teach at Xavier, a small, four-year, liberal arts university in New Orleans, and some time around 1989 we had a faculty retreat where one exercise involved forming small groups to talk about our academic writing. By chance, two members of my group also wanted to write fiction, myself and a woman from the English Department. A short time later, another English Prof—David Lanoue—joined us, and we three constituted the core of a group that met pretty much every week for the next decade.

I wrote two novels and rewrote a third while in that group, and all of them were published. David also wrote a couple of books around that time, *Haiku Guy* and *Laughing Buddha*. Both were published; both are beautiful works. In fact, though the group eventually dissolved, David and I still meet on occasion to discuss writing. We've become good friends.

My first group was a critique group. Each week we shared and criticized each other's stories, and I believe this helped me tremendously early in my career. The criticism *itself* helped, of course, because other members of the group often caught mistakes that I was too close to my own work to see. But the group also helped by giving me deadlines to meet. The others didn't *make* me write, but I always wanted to have something to share when it was my turn. After all, the others were writing. And how could I appear lazy in their eyes? So, I wrote and wrote, until writing became a habit. I've long thought that *this* was actually the most important role of that group. And I believe from conversations that I've had with David that he would agree.

I enjoyed my first group so much that I sought another one as soon as it broke up. It didn't work as well, although both the other writers in it were good folk. It was also a critique group, but by that time I needed less critique and more general discussion of writing and writers. Part of the problem, too, was that it was physically inconvenient for me to meet with the second group, and as a result I probably didn't put as much into it.

I'm in a very different kind of group today. There aren't any critiques, but I get support when I'm struggling or when I'm emotionally drained, and I have a sounding board for ideas. The members come to my signings and they've turned me on to speaking engagements and other opportunities. I started a blog as a result of conversations that begin in that group, and it's been a lot of fun as well as a source of inspiration. (The blog is at (<http://charlesgramlich.blogspot.com/> by the way.)

I don't believe a writer has to join a group to write. But I do believe that my groups have enriched *my* writing life and have aided in my career. They might do the same for you.

So, what do you do if you want to join a group? Here are my suggestions, gleaned from my own experiences. See what you think, and let me know if you agree, *or* if you find out differently.

First, I don't think a group works well with less than four members, but eight is too many. If you have only three, what do you do when someone misses, as someone will? You have to cancel, and maybe this was a time when you *needed* feedback. On the other hand, if you have more than six or seven in the group there's not enough time for everyone to share, and, inevitably, someone ends up listening all the time while others talk. They'll grow disgruntled and bad things will result. Trust me.

Second, writing groups need focus or they'll soon deteriorate into "so and so's problem of the day," or "did you know....some thing or other about some one or other?" Critique groups have a built in structure, where everyone has to have a chance to share. But the group I'm in now doesn't do critiques. Instead, we brainstorm discussion topics at one meeting, then parcel those topics out over a dozen other meetings down the line.

So that each person gets a chance to talk about their own work, my current group always starts with a "round robin" where people discuss what they've been working on and the problems they're having. But, we limit the time for sharing, and then we move on to our discussion topic. The resulting discussions are very freewheeling and we get off on tangents all the time, but trying to at least talk "around" a topic insures that our meetings are spent productively in an exploration of writing and are not simply social affairs.

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# Reviews

## Ammonite

Nicola Griffith

Del Ray, 2002

397 Pages

ISBN 0-345-45238-0

Review by D. L. Parker

*Quick:* name the top ten hoariest plot devices of the now-venerable science fiction genre. Yes, yes, the mad computer one is definitely in there, but I'm thinking of another good ol' cliché this time. It was used in Star Trek and in a myriad of other fanciful universes. Yes, it's the old device of *a world without men*.

We've seen it before: the beefy spaceman, all rock-hard biceps and rampant testosterone, arrives on a mysterious world where only women are to be found. That may be the most popular riff on the old chestnut, true (I'm *sure*, though I can't remember any specifics, that the skirt-chasing, love 'em and leave 'em Captain Kirk must have done this theme *several* times in his usual salacious style), but there have been others. There are the more-cojones-than-a-man riffs of Xena and the Amazons on one end of the spectrum, and on the other, as our author herself notes, we have the Woman as Vegetarian Saintly Mother Goddess Who Wouldn't Swat A Fly. None of these ever caught my attention for long (though I must admit to enjoying the campy tongue-in-cheek irreverence of *Xena* on more than one occasion).

Nicola Griffith imagines a world without men, and at least she takes us into a new direction. Jeep is a lost-and-refound human colony that humanity, in the form of Big Business and the Company, would like to reclaim for its exploitable resources. But there's a real problem. The world is host to an indigenous virus that nails all the men, and there's no cure for the disease. Understandably, there's a Terrene warship orbiting Jeep, with its license-to-kill firmly tacked to the captain's chair. I can't say as I blame them.

But Jeep also represents those valuable resources, so the Company hasn't given up. Marghe Taishan, an anthropologist, is sent down to Jeep to both study the colony and test out a new vaccine. It looks like it might be Last Stop for Marghe, as there are rumors that personnel who leave Jeep are conveniently never heard from again.

But in the meantime, Marghe has a lot of mysterious to solve. How, in the absence of men, do the low-tech former colonists manage to reproduce sexually? What's the link between the almost-vanished native race, the

Goths, and the virus that afflicts the colonists? How do the human colonists manage to recall ancestral memories dating back hundreds of years? (This last is a question that is never satisfactorily answered, by the way, except for the catchall answer of "the virus". I kept wanting to ask: *but where are those memories stored? When are they passed – at conception? Death? Etc.*). And, what's the mysterious mating ritual called *deep trance*?

Marghe strikes out on her own in pursuit of a vanished and presumed dead assistant. But she soon falls victim to a disturbed young woman who imagines herself the reincarnation of the Goddess of Death. Marghe is taken prisoner by a slowly crumbling tribe named the Echraidhe, and by the time Marghe has a few answers to her questions, she's a *long* ways from her professional anthropologist beginnings.

'Ammonite' is a thought-provoking book, but it raised more questions than it answered for this reader. In Ms. Griffith's *Afterward*, she addresses some of her themes explicitly. I quote, because Ms. Griffith says it better than I can. '*Women are not aliens. Take away men and we do not automatically lose our fire and intelligence and sex drive*'. A society of women, in Ms. Griffith's view, is simply a society of people, with the inevitable spectrum of human behavior, bad and good. As she states, '*Women are not inherently passive or dominant, maternal or viscous. We are all different*'.

There may be some truth to that statement, but perhaps, in this reader's opinion, it's not the whole truth, either. I wish Ms. Griffith had examined the very real questions raised by an all-female society with both more depth and more realism. Let's take one example. Current popular theory holds that same-sex attractions are primarily *biological*; that is, one doesn't *choose* to be homosexual, one is *born* that way. (This is in opposition to the older theory that homosexuals are made, not born, because Momma was a controlling harridan, or Daddy was a nancy who wore pink shirts and nosegays in his buttonhole – or whatever Freud happened to think up during his latest doze on the couch).

But if nature not nurture makes one homosexual, why are all Griffith's characters so well adjusted to their lesbian lifestyles? Our protagonist segues into a lesbian relationship (thankfully not explicitly described, for those who might balk at the nitty-gritty of gay sex) without a backward glance. We're never told whether she was a lesbian before she arrived on Jeep, but whatever her previous preferences, Marghe doesn't seem to miss the companionship of men, not even her father's. In fact, *no one* in this book misses the

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### Ammonite (con't)

men. Men don't just *not exist*; they don't even *matter*. Yet I assume (if the nature vs. nurture argument holds true) that Griffith's all-female society should have at least a few, and, (if the ratio of born-heterosexual-to-born-homosexual of our present population holds true), *many* biological malcontents who just don't get into breasts as sex objects. Instead, there's not a female on the planet that seems to miss the men.

Ms. Griffith also ignores, though I wish she hadn't, the thousands of years of Darwinian selection that developed gender roles in the first place. The myth of the Amazons notwithstanding, human gender roles are clearly defined by nature (as they are in chimps). Men, as well as male chimpanzees, are predominantly the gender that bands together, wages war, and (at their best, bless their hairy chins) protect their pregnant females and young. Maybe men don't do it very well, most of the time, but still, history alone tells us this role description has some truth. No, I am not a rabid right-winger who thinks women should stay home in the kitchen: I earn my own living sans male help, and have since I was twenty. But I read history; and history, as well as common sense, leads me to deduce that there may have been some clear biological advantages to the classic division of gender roles.

Modern society has glossed over these ancient gender-based functions, but they evolved for a reason. An eight-month pregnant waddling female needs *someone* to fight off the cave bears and fetch the pickles from the store. When we're left, as in Ms. Griffith's story, with only the female half of the equation, how does such a fundamental sea change *truly* affect the roles between a mated, (same sex, in this case), couple? Would such a society evolve toward one party taking the role of protector and provider (are "mannish" dykes evolving toward such a role, in fact)?

I can't say, of course, but the question is intriguing. I beg to differ with Ms. Griffith's own answer: in her society, not only do we *not* seem to have the biological equivalents of the ancient provider-protector vs. nurturer-caregiver roles, but *both halves of the mated female couple become pregnant at exactly the same time*. What's the Darwinian advantage of both parents becoming helplessly handicapped with pregnancies at the same time? Excuse me my inappropriate humor, *who* goes for the pickles?

I'd love to hear back from a real-life anthropologist who has made a genuine case study of an all-female society. The lesbian subculture aside, the only genuine

all-female society I know of is our incarcerated population. Perhaps it doesn't provide the best case study, but I wish some enterprising anthropologist would examine it all the same. What *really* happens to a woman who's faced with spending the rest of her life in only the company of women? Will she, as Ms. Griffith seems to suggest, segue inevitably from heterosexual to homosexual? (If so, the nature vs. nurture theory of sexual orientation has been decided in the favor of nurture, which also implies, of course, that it's a genuine *choice*, not biological destiny).

There are more questions, more than I can address here. How, for example, would women express conflict in such all-female societies? In Ms. Griffith's view, it seems, *exactly as men do*, which I also question. Any girl who was a late-blooming frump in middle and high school can tell you that women don't need spears and sticks. We can kill quite effectively with words. I think that, in general, women do not express hostility and conflict in exactly the same way men do – though let no one think we're less ferocious for that.

*Ah*. The questions that could be answered by a genuine case study of an all-female society are *fascinating*. *You*, out there, with your master's degree from that ivy-bedecked institution, give up those boring studies of headhunters from Borneo or the mating habits of excessively spoiled divorced New Yorkers. Do something *interesting* instead. Book yourself into your nearest penal colony, and find out exactly what *did* happen to Martha Stewart when she wore those orange coveralls!

But until some enterprising anthropologist answers my call, gentle reader, try Ms. Griffith's book, and decide for yourself. 'Ammonite' makes a great book to share with your coffee-shop amateur debating society. Enjoy those arguments!

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### Danse Macabre Laurell K. Hamilton

Berkley, June 2006

\$25.95, Hardcover, 496 pgs.

ISBN: 04252077978

Review by Harriet Klausner

Federal Marshal Anita Blake, vampire hunter and zombie raiser, is worried that she is pregnant. She has no idea who the father is since she is sleeping with three vampires, two were-leopards, and one werewolf. She is part of a triumvirate with Jean-Claude Master Vampire of St. Louis and Richard the werewolf leader of his pack. Together they are stronger than they are apart.

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# Reviews

## Danse Macabre (con't)

However, the *ardeur*, a magical essence that needs sex to nourish it is growing more powerful inside Anita and she needs to keep feeding it or it will start selecting its own victims. As Anita's powers grow, so do those of the other two members of the triumvirate, While Anita looks for someone she is not metaphysically attached to so that she can feed the *ardeur*, masters of the cities from all over the United States are coming to St. Louis to attend a vampire ballet hosted by Jean-Claude. Not all of the attendees are friends; some want to gauge how powerful Jean-Claude is with his two allies at his side while others want to use Anita for their own ends. Unless Anita can control her *ardeur* their enemies might defeat them.

Every Anita Blake book is a fantastic urban fantasy and *Danse Macabre* is no exception. Readers wonder who amongst the guests is an adversary that the trio must deal with at a time when Anita is not at her best between the pregnancy and the increasingly out of control *ardeur*. This is a fabulous action-packed story line filled with characters readers have come to think of as friends. There is an irony in the Anitaverse. There is very little prejudice among humans or within a species group but racism exists between the supernatural races and ordinary humans towards the preternatural races due to fear of their powers. That is a shame because the supernatural community tries so hard to get along with homo sapiens.

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## In the Forests of the Night

**Amelia Atwater-Rhodes**

Dell Laurel-Leaf, 1999

\$5.99, Mass Market, 147 pgs

ISBN: 0440228166

Review by Destiny Boddy

*In the Forests of the Night* was the very first novel by a teen novelist, Amelia Atwater-Rhodes. *In the Forests of the Night* appeared on the bookshelves in 1999 when Atwater-Rhodes had been a mere 13.

In all honesty I had never heard of this wide acclaimed teen writer until I read the *Battle of the Books*; books for 2005-2006. Once I read her novel *Hawksong* cover to cover I was hooked. I wanted to read more and know more about this clearly talented writer. Sadly due to the small town I live in I was unable to get her very first novel; that is until we got our first Barnes & Noble.

*In the Forests of the Night*, follows the life of Risika a vampire over 300 years old changed against her will. Upon the change, Risika is no longer able to live her life in the human world and is unwilling to live her

life in the Vampire one. *In the Forests of the Night* is narrated by Risika in the first person as it follows her life over 300 years after her change. Every chapter or so the reader gets a flash back into Risika's long past life from before the change and the after affects.

Atwater-Rhodes first novel is simple in plot and quite predictable. In my opinion *In the Forests of the Night* does not contain much plot twists and due to the simplicity lacks gripping suspense. But young adult readers that are lower in reading level will find it an easy and comprehensible read.

I do not favor many flash backs or switches of time but I have to applaud Atwater-Rhodes ability at doing it so well and though the novel is simple in plot and structure the pacing is managed well.

Most of the characters seem to lack dimension but Atwater-Rhodes does create a complicated and interesting main character, Risika. She stands out far more than the rest of the caste from, *In the Forests of the Night*. I would have liked the novel more if the other characters had more dimensions and characteristics to add to the whole picture.

Atwater-Rhodes description out does it's self again. Just like every other book I have read of hers', before I was able to buy her very first, the description is fantastic. I absolutely love the way Atwater-Rhodes can bring the dark and scary world of the Vampire a live.

Though it is probably my least favorite of her books I still got to say for a debut novel it was worthy of publication. I think it's one of those types of book that gives those stubborn and reluctant readers the will to read. *In the Forests of the Night* might have had more impact if written in third person, but then again that's just my opinion.

I must add that I have recently read an article on how the publishing market loves the publicity of young novelist and all they bring to the publishing world, which is true. But as I read on I was interested in the fact that the author mentioned that young author 'Stardom' usually ends sooner than it starts and again that is partly true. But I can a sure you 'the reader' and all of Amelia Atwater-Rhodes dedicated readers that it is highly unlikely that Atwater-Rhodes will be burning out anytime soon. Since her first novels' publication she has had a new book out every year since 1999. So at a mere twenty-three old she has 7 novel credits to her name! The newest being *FalconDance* the third novel in her, Kiesha'ra series. If anyone is interested in looking for more information check out Amelia's site at: [www.tdos.org](http://www.tdos.org).

# Reviews

## In Memorium

The Illuminata lost one of its most ardent supporters and first readers this month. Danis Black served T-Press in many capacities—editor, sounding board, post-hurricane warehouse administrator and landlord—but mostly she was a friend and avid fan of literature. Her sound advice and dry humor will be sorely missed. Our prayers are with her family.

### Fall of Knight

**Peter David**

Ace, June 2006

\$24.95, Hardcover, 352 pgs.

ISBN: 044101402X

Review by Harriet Klausner

Retirement doesn't rest easy for the once and future king. After Merlin released him from the cave after spending a millennium there recovering from Mordred's wound, King Arthur travels to New York where he meets the reincarnated Gwen, becomes mayor of New York City and then President of the United States. When Gwen is wounded by a terrorist and falls into an irreversible coma Arthur searches for and finds the Holy Grail and gives it to her to drink where upon she was miraculously healed. He retires from office because the world can't know Gwen is alive and they sail into the sunset.

Happily even after isn't all it's cracked up to be and King Arthur is bored. When Gwen is discovered alive by spy satellites, Arthur and Gwen return to the white house and on a national TV show demonstrates the healing powers of the Grail. Everyone who is sick and ailing wants to drink from it and Arthur and Gwen, along with Sir Percival go into hiding until a businessman comes up with a way of distilling the potency of the water. Although "Grail Water" is a success, using mystical powers in such large quantities could cause a backlash that could devastate the world.

The humor and dry wit of Peter David makes *Fall of Knight* a very enjoyable and entertaining reading experience. The sub-plot of a necromancer who wants to steal the Grail and use it with the Spear Lurin to wipe humanity off the face of the earth adds another layer of excitement to a richly developed storyline. Arthur is seen as a mighty warrior, a loving husband, a person who needs to help mankind and a capable of making a mistake. In other words, the author humanizes the myth and in doing so makes him even more heroic.

## Dead Water

**Barbara Hambly**

Bantam Dell, 2004

\$24.95, Hardback, 297 pgs

ISBN 0-5553-10964-2

Review by D. L. Parker

To me, it seems as though Hurricane Katrina has done more than flush New Orleans with the filth of oil and sewage laden storm waters. Before the wind exposed the ineptitude and unreliability of its politicians and police force, before revelations of its poisoned race relations and brutal murder rate made the watery invasion seem like some kind of divine retribution, New Orleans was a magic place to me. I've never been there, of course. Perhaps that's a good thing. Shambala and others cities of our hearts are often better kept dream than reality. I know now what tarnished fact would do to my fantasy.

But my mother spent a good part of her childhood in Louisiana, and it was her stories that made New Orleans a fabulous place to me, burdened with a mystique that only San Francisco, of any other American city, could match. In my nostrils I can smell the peppery aroma of chicory coffee; in a hot night scented with honeysuckle an enigmatic black coach pulls away from a fanciful iron gate; black men with gleaming horns at their lips play the inexplicably merry notes of *When the Saints Go Marching In* as they stroll away from the newly filled graveside. There was something about New Orleans as alien and inexplicable as an artifact taken from an ancient African tomb. It was at once both the most American of our cities and the least.

I have to thank Barbara Hambly for giving me back that sense of wonder that I once associated with New Orleans. In the pages of 'Dead Water', nineteenth century New Orleans comes alive just I imagined it. In the humid streets of the city that was already old by the 1830's, the races mix with a fatally easy fascination for each other. That mingling of culture and genes forever changes both, and like metals fused in a fiery cauldron, something new and unguessed at is formed out of their heat and friction. In Hambly's story we can see the crucible that both nurtured and destroyed slavery and its evils. There is the whole cast of characters here, from the gullible abolitionist waving tracts promoting freedom for slaves and vegetarianism to the two-footed beasts who sold other human beings for profit and those prepared to die to stop them. There are all

# Reviews

## Dead Water (con't)

the ordinary souls caught in the middle of some of the greatest events of our nation's history.

This is no more than a background to an involving mystery, though. Benjamin January is a black free man, but as any immigrant to American shores knows, there are no guarantees that come with freedom. January is an educated black man, a musician and a Paris-trained surgeon. But with the freedom to earn one's own precarious living comes the deadly consequences of failure. America, then and now, exemplifies St. Paul's warning *if he will not work, he will not eat*, more than any other nation.

So when January is offered a chance to remove the heavy breathing of the wolf at the door (and to fund the small school he and his wife have started), he takes it. A bank official has absconded with a hundred thousand dollars in gold and securities. The president of the bank wants the money back quietly, and fast, before the word gets out to depositors. There's a nice sum in it for January, who's earned himself a small reputation for being the man to turn to in private problems of this kind.

But to get it, January, his wife Rose, and his partner, the opium-wasted, Latin-quoting white musician Hannibal Sefton, will have to follow the trail of the thief up the river. Up the river means that January has to leave the relative freedom of New Orleans for lands whose cane and cotton plantations require an endless supply of slaves. Soon January and his two companions are involved in a cat-and-mouse game of bluff and counter-bluff played out on the cramped confines of the steamboat and the raw river ports it docks at. Where is the stolen gold? Which of January's fellow passengers are confederates of the larcenous bank official, and which are scheming to steal the loot from the thief ... and to kill anyone who gets in the way? When the thief's dead body is found tangled in the paddles of the steamboat, there are more candidates for the murder than January can keep track of. By the time January finds the key to this mystery, there's been more than one murder done...

Many of you will recognize Barbara Hambly's name from her many fantasy and science fiction works. I think I enjoy her continuing series of mystery-thrillers featuring Benjamin January more than her (generally excellent) speculative fiction works. Beware, though. The story isn't for the faint of heart; much of Hambly's works have an element of horror, and 'Dead Water' is no exception. There are some raw scenes (and language) in this story. It's probably true it would be impossible to write realistically of that era without some disturbing scenes; the de-humanizing of

our fellow man into an object of monetary value is one of the most evil deeds *homo sapiens* has ever committed against himself. I wish such discrimination were an evil of only the past. But if Ms. Hambly's characters are to be taken as examples, we can have hope there will always be those who speak up against such horror.

And in the meantime, that fantasy New Orleans, in all its dark mystery and edgy glory, is once again firmly in my mind. I just need a time travel machine to reach it. *Thank you, Ms. Hambly!*

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## The Last Mortal Man

Syne Mitchell

Roc, June 2006

\$6.99, Mass Market, 448 pgs.

ISBN 0451460944

Review by Harriet Klausner

The twenty fourth century is a whole new world. Nano-biology has advanced to the point where cities can be grown and those who can afford it can be converted to the Deathless—immortals who never age, fall ill or need sleep or food. Lucius Sterling founded the nano-biology firm, and he decides who will be immortal or not depending on if they can meet his price and if they are useful. His most trusted employee is Alexia, a Deathless who once tried to kill him but now watches his back against his many enemies.

Lucius had the scientist who created mano-biology grow his own nation island Elysium where he is the ruler. While Alexa is the one person he trusts, Jack, his great-grandson, is the one being he loves. Jack develops an allergy to nano-biology and must live in a dead zone in Watershed Valley, Montana—a place free of the Deathless. He is called back to Elysium because Lucius discovers that someone has created a dissembler that destroys nano-biology. He wants Alexa and Jack to find where it is being produced and stop it. While they search for it, whole cities are destroyed and millions of people die. Unless they can stop it from being used, civilization and most of the world's population will be destroyed.

Syne Mitchell's opening book in her new series "The Deathless" is an exciting seat of your pants, science fiction thriller. The two protagonists are likeable and understandable characters who together make a team that is capable of solving the impossible. The wonders of future civilization in the twenty fourth century dazzle the audiences with its advancements and higher standards of living. There are few authors who can match Ms. Mitchell's believable world building.

# Reviews

## Rainbows End

### Vernor Vinge

Tor, 2006

\$25.95, Hardcover, 364 pgs

ISBN 0-312-85684-9

Review by Danielle Parker

Does anyone realize just how drastically the art of writing a story has changed in the last hundred years? What I'm thinking of, specifically, is how *story openers* have changed. Let's take, for example, the famous opening line of Melville's 1851 "Moby Dick". After announcing "Call me Ishmael", the narrator takes a leisurely stroll through city and country. Then we get his reasons for going to sea; we practically get a philosophical treatise. No one's in a hurry, neither reader nor story-teller. We *know* we're going to get acquainted with this guy. We're going to know his *soul*.

Contrast that typically nineteenth century leisure with the opening of a typically modern story I picked up last week. In J. V. Jones' "The Baker's Boy", we start off with the nasty murder of the narrator's old servant; next, our ungrateful narrator drugs and then rapes (in queasily graphic detail) a helpless woman; and at the point that I closed the book, no more than a handful of pages into the story, we have the even more stomach-churning flashback of how the narrator killed his own dear old Mom. Sorry, folks, no book review of *this* one. I just couldn't get past the matricide. I wish I hadn't gotten past the rape.

I don't want to try to number the stories I've picked up recently (in my innocence) that start with such an apparently de rigueur shocker. I can't even relate the particulars of the most recent one in a family forum, except to tell you that what was done in the first three pages was worse than Mr. Jones – or, I assure you, I – could imagine. I found myself looking at the eminently ordinary, pleasant, salt-and-pepper bearded face of that latter author and *wondering*... when a writer channels the Jack the Ripper mind-set so well, what's *really* in his soul?

Thank goodness, then, for Vernor Vinge. There's brightness there. It shines through his writing as an essentially humanistic light. Yes, we have villains and rascals in his stories. We have troubled old men and troubled youths. But people find redemption, sometimes. Villains account for their misdeeds in a tangle of typically human self-justifications. No one's entirely black or white. That's Life, written the way it happens. Do I feel good instead of scum-dipped after

finishing a Vernor Vinge story? Yes, and what a nice change *that* is.

In "Rainbows End", Robert Gu is a man re-born. Alzheimer's disease was slowly destroying him. But modern technology came to the rescue. Gu is a Rip van Winkle returned to a time he no longer understands. He has a newly functioning brain and body, and that's a great gift. But he's lost something. He was a world-famous poet. He was also a *monster sacrè*. His genius had its roots in an interpersonal cruelty as perceptive as it was destructive. Now he's lost both talents. Robert Gu knows what he used to be. He still has to find out what he *can* be.

His most pressing question is whether he can catch up to the technological advances enough to survive (i.e., earn a living) in the wired world of the future. Imagine all the functions of the most advanced Internet gateway transposed into the human head. Wired means wired in the head. There's the plain vanilla reality that Gu is used to seeing, and there's selective reality – that drab house on the corner seen through a new paradigm becomes a fanciful castle, or a Terry Pratchett-inspired zany purple edifice.

So far, futuristic as this sounds, we're not looking at anything that hasn't been well-trodden by the likes of William Gibson or Neal Stephenson. But Vinge envisions a new weapon of mass destruction for his future, and someone is on the loose with it in "Rainbows End". YGBM stands for "You Gotta Believe Me", and Big Brother would have loved it. A massive crowd at a sports event views an innocuous advertisement, and there's an unexplained run on candy nougats. People whose business it is to watch for such things know that *someone* out there has just successfully tested a new YGBM super-weapon... which could change the world as they know it.

Who's the culprit? It looks like the villain might even be scarier than Mr. Vanilla Terrorist or some monster of unbridled capitalism... the infective YGBM agent appears to come from a top-secret laboratory owned by the (still-super powerful) Americans. Soon we have spies and *agent provocateurs* – not all of them in corporal form – climbing all over each other. The reborn Gu, in turn, finds himself in the less-than-enviable position of the man-on-the-inside, ready-made for the role of betrayer. Will Gu sell out his loved ones to regain the lost poetic art he craves, or will he come to terms with the new, and less gifted, man he is now? Read the book and find out.

I suppose there's little here in terms of ideas that Gibson or Stephenson, not to mention that eminent

# Reviews

## Rainbow's End (con't)

futurist George Orwell himself, haven't done before. I'm left with the same questions I always ask. Isn't there an intrinsic value to reality itself, vs. a reality viewed through a rosy filter of one's personal choice? When our *phenomenal consciousness* becomes entirely diverse (in other words, I see red, and you see purple; I see a house, and you see a castle), what damage have we *really* done to our shared humanity? Why is artificial reality so attractive? Given the choice, would we choose to look at the world as it is, or through a filter which turns every house into a castle or every car into a snorting steed?

One fine day, we may find out... or we may not. The mere computational cost of such totally interactive, real-time filters as described by Gibson, Vinge et al may prohibit such a future. Rarely do our futurists ever seem to worry about what makes these wired futures commercially viable. I guess I'm old-fashioned: I always ask myself where the money is made, and if money *isn't* being made, I don't think it's going to happen. Stone age to post-human, dirty old profit still makes the wheels turn. Ask Microsoft. Our wired futures may be a lot worse than we think they will be. Imagine: spam delivered straight to your head.

So perhaps it's not ideas that make me fond of Vernor Vinge's story. People, in the end, make stories we want to read. Vinge's deft characterizations make me happy to pick his books up. Keep your rapist, matricidal, gut-skewering protagonists. I don't want to spend time with them. The wandering Ishmael and brave little Miri from Vinge's story are more my style. Bring on the good vibes, Mr. Vinge!

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## Smoke and Ashes

### Tanya Huff

Daw, Jun 2006

\$24.95, Hardcover, 400 pgs.

ISBN: 0756403472

Review by Harriet Klausner

It has been almost two months since Tony Foster fought any supernatural entities so he enjoys the respite especially with his promotion to the Trainee Assistant Director on the set of Darkest Night, a TV show starring a vampire detective. Tony finds life ironic that he works on a vampire show when his lover, best friend, and father figure Henry Fitzroy (baseborn son of King Henry VIII) is a real vampire.

Tony's hiatus from the supernatural ends when he learns from stunt woman Leah Barrett who doubles

as a Demongate keeping her demon out of our world that the Demon Convergence has begun. It is a time when energies are moving in such a way that the barriers between earth and the Hells are penetrable. Leah is 3500 years old and because her demon master miscast a spell she has been protected and he unable to breach the "walls". If he gains access as it seems likely he will, the demon master will dominate the world of humanity. His minions are coming for Leah and Tony, who still remains a tyro when it comes to using his wizard powers. With the help of friends like Henry, Tony knows he will stand brave and strong trying to stop the demon horde.

The hero has changed from a street hustler and prostitute to a courageous person willing to die to keep his friends and his world safe. This superb urban fantasy is at times funny, but mostly dramatic as there is plenty of action especially as Tony learns how to use his skills as he wars with demon assassins sent to kill Leah, considered by her kind as a traitor. Tanya Huff writes a spellbinding fascinating tale that fans of Laurell K. Hamilton and Jim Butcher will enjoy.

## The Ghost Brigades

### John Scalzi

Tor, 2006

\$23.95, Hardback, 315 pgs

ISBN 0-765-31502-5

Review by D. L. Parker

A few weeks ago I read a story that could have earned the newspaper that reported it a not-for-children rating in spite of the necessarily matter-of-fact tone of the article. The local Sacred Heart hospital was asking patients who had recently received transplants to come in for testing. Commercially minded ghouls had secretly broken into funeral homes. Contaminated cadavers had supplied donor material. Someone's granddad went to his grave missing a tendon or two. Granny lost some skin.

It seems not even the dead can rest in peace when there's money to be made from their mortal remains. There's no respect for the sacred shell that once contained a living, thinking person today. The dead are meat in our necrophilic society. We've become the neo-Aztecs, selling and consuming the blood and tissue of our fellow human beings in our amoral pursuit of capitalism and extended life at any cost. If Granny still has her teeth, she'd better solder in those gold fillings good before she retires to her six feet of farm.

# Reviews

## The Ghost Brigades (con't)

I was reminded of that story when I read 'The Ghost Brigades'. Oh, that's not because the author intended to raise any moral and ethical questions about the practices of organ harvesting in this story. 'Ghost Brigades' is much simpler than that. You have your familiar military sci-fi here, a sub-genre that seems to be growing at a cancerously exponential rate. The questions the story raised in my mind are ones I'm sure the author didn't intend.

That's because the story reflects – or takes for granted – our own attitudes toward the dead. As a character in the story remarks, once you're dead, your DNA doesn't belong to you anymore. Thus, the Ghost Brigade of the title is an army of super-soldiers genetically engineered from the DNA of their former bodies. And once the former body has served its purpose, it sure makes good mulch for the food crops.

Jared Dirac is such a reincarnated super-soldier. But he's a special case. His super-human body has been engineered from the DNA of a traitor, and his unwitting brain holds a copy of the turncoat scientist's consciousness. Charles Boutin is a scientist who betrayed humanity's biggest military secrets to its most dangerous alien rival, and then somehow found a way to unite three of those said rivals in an unheard-of alliance.

But Boutin has disappeared. Humanity wants him back, dead or alive. Jared Dirac, it seems, may be the only key to finding the errant scientist.

The rest of this story is for those of you who love military sci-fi. We have the wish fulfillment super-soldier, tricked out with an on-board BrainPal computer in this instance, as well as the usual goodie super-weaponry. We have the usual description of said soldier's training and military skirmishes and bonding with his fellow mates (man-to-man and man-to-woman, as women make good super-soldiers, too, it seems, and even provide the bonus of great no-apron-strings-attached sex).

The book's easy to read (easy as in not difficult, mentally taxing, etc.). Jared makes a simple, one could say childish, narrator (in spite of the fact that his brain supposedly holds the consciousness of a genius, somewhere). That may be because he's a baby, more or less, like most of his fellow soldiers. They're force-fed all they need to know of life in a year or two and graduate to the tried-and-true manufactured grunt pattern. I guess no army wants a Schopenhauer. That human will business would really be a serious liability.

Jared, of course, eventually confronts his progenitor,

the traitor scientist, who's not smart enough to have reasoned himself out of the old if-I'm-dictator-of-the-universe-I-can-save-us-all paper bag, it seems. Because this is an ultimately optimistic, feel-good military story, you just know Jared's going to stick by his mates, and there will be plenty of shooting and heroism to satisfy any wannabe super-soldier in the showdown. If this is your thing, this is better-than-average example of the genre, I suppose. It moves, at least.

But it was unspoken cultural assumptions in this story that really interested me, because they're *ours*. Once upon a time the dead were held as sacred remnants of human souls. Some societies, such as the Inca, even considered their sacred mummies as powers in their own right. It was not so long ago that our ancestors (my own Scots-Irish maternal grandmother, at least) honored their dead with lengthy wakes. I remember with undiluted exactitude a service I attended for a friend who died, at age eighteen, of cancer: the cloud of incense spread by the censer in the priest's hand; the hypnotic rhythm of sitting, kneeling, chanting; the incongruously grand coffin that held the visage I could not bear to look upon; the communal weight of grief and regret; my acute anxiety that the heat of the room might bring me a whiff of unendurable decay. In order to extend our mortal lives, we have come to consider our dead as no more than tissue we can harvest and re-use. What have we *really* paid to gain those few more years of life? Far more than we should have, I think.

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## Valentine's Exile

E.E. Knight

Roc, June 2006

\$23.95, Hardcover, 304 pgs.

ISBN: 0451460871

Review by Harriet Klausner

The year is 2072 and it has been fifty years since the Kurians came and conquered earth, using humans to satiate their soul hunger. The Reapers—creations of the Kurians—need blood to survive and take it with a syringe-like tongue. They take the auras of people and send them to their Kurian masters who live in strongly secured fortresses.

Freedom fighter David Valentine has fought since he was old enough to hold a weapon and was there when the Kurians suffered two major defeats, the retaking of Dallas and much of their surrounding area and the creation of the Ozark Free

Con't on page 13

Territory. When his wounded commander William Post asks David to find his wife, who disappeared into Kurian territory, he has no idea he will be jailed on murder charges brought by an enemy who has a grievance against him, move into various parts of the Kurian order to find clues to where William's wife Gail is, and fight Reapers and other monsters just to get information on Gailis, one of many women who passed a blood test and was taken to a special facility.

The vampire Earth series keeps getting better and better. Earth is a dark and conquered place where quislings (human collaborators) do almost as much to threaten people as their masters do. The protagonist is no innocent, but he is a dedicated person who knows he will face danger but feels the goal is worth the price. Hopefully in future books in this series, readers will learn more about the Kurians because for the most part they stay in the background and let their minions do their work. *Valentine's Exile* is a fantastic work of science fiction in the vein of Wells' *War of the Worlds*.

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#### Writer's Block (con't)

Finally, and most critically, each member of a writing group must be aware of their impact on the other members. Too often, one member sucks up the time talking too much about *their* sales, *their* angst, *their* "egos." I've seen groups of wonderful writers break up over this, and it always seems a tragedy to me. But it can be avoided if, 1) time limits are set *and* enforced, 2) members speak up for themselves or others speak up for them, and 3) if folks are just cognizant of the needs and feelings of others. Failing that, tell your group about the wonderful writing column you just read and then show them this piece. Make sure you highlight the last paragraph.

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#### RPG Corner (con't)

Of course there are plenty more elements that can be identified, and these can be expanded and qualified down to tiny levels of detail, but for the purpose of broad strokes to get an idea of the culture, this should suffice. Some of these elements blend together easily, and in the process of developing one you may find yourself developing several at the same time. This is exactly what you want to do. No culture evolves one aspect of itself independently of the others. Any thing that forces a change or development to a single

element will impact the whole of the culture, and the more intertwined these elements become, the more rich and realistic your culture will be.

So why is creating all of this important? Why not just borrow an existing culture to go along with an existing race? The answer is your players. Players in RPGs tend to be a fairly well read lot, and they will likely enjoy all of the same material you enjoy. This means that they likely know and understand the cultures of all your favorite races. If you simply transplant a pre-existing culture onto a common race, the players will not have the opportunity to explore that culture. If they can instantly know how the NPC race will react to what the PCs say and do, there is no suspense. By creating a new, unique culture, you are allowing the PCs to slowly learn about the people, and to get into trouble as needs of the plot dictate. It's also helpful to know how a person of this new race will react to the PCs. Let's say the PCs, in typical PC fashion come upon a member of your new race. They say hello and offer their hand for a friendly shake. They have no way of knowing that the NPC race views the extended right hand as a signal for attack. Just like that, drama and tension is created, and the PCs have to discover what they did wrong (or just escape from the incensed natives). If you had borrowed a culture from a book that the PC head read, he would have known about the handshake taboo, and probably wouldn't have done it.

Plus, in the act of creating this race, you are making something unique, and you will know their culture inside and out. Even if your race looks like something the PCs know about (like dwarves or goblins), they will act wholly differently. Because you built the culture behind the race, you can provide in-depth descriptions of what they behave like, what they do in idle time, how they live, how they think and what motivates them. The more detail you can provide, the more deeply the PCs can become involved with your game, and the more real your NPCs will become. In my opinion, any opportunity for a Game Master to immerse the Players in the game should be taken. The memories it creates will live a long time in the PCs mind, and that is what it's all about. All of this holds true for writing fiction as well. Fully realized characters, societies and races are endearing to the reader, and pull them in, keep them turning pages and exploring your world. In the realm of fiction writing, you don't have the luxury of borrowing from other's work. You have to create your world and everyone in it from scratch. Hopefully this column will help you do that.