



# The Illuminata

Delving Deep Into The Worlds of Science Fiction and Fantasy

## And the T-ppy Goes To...

By Bret Funk

As the first phase of the 2006 Illuminations SF Writing Contest (and subsequent *Beacons of Tomorrow* anthology) comes to a close, I heave a brief and much needed sigh of relief. Despite a barrage of obstacles (personal, familial, and 9-5 job-related), I and the other judges managed to read and rate all of the contest submissions before our self-imposed deadline of the March edition. That this edition of the *Illuminata* comes to you a wee bit late is a testament to how close we cut it.

Before boring you with details, I want to take a minute to thank everyone who participated in the Illuminations contest. It takes a certain amount of courage to submit a work to a contest (even at an all-but-invisible independent press), putting it out there for comparison and critique. Winner, runner-up or not-quite-ready-for-prime-time, each and every one of you deserves a healthy round of applause and a special kudos from me. As I've said before, it's the determination of burgeoning writers like you that

keeps speculative fiction fresh and alive.

That being said, I'd like to extend a special congratulations to Ray Veen, author of *Onion Worlds* and winner of this year's contest. Veen narrowly beat out two other entries to take the top spot, and he will receive (in addition to a guaranteed slot in the upcoming anthology) a modest monetary award of \$25.

This year's contest was a resounding success, surpassing our previous contests in almost every area. Overall submissions nearly doubled from the 2004 Illuminations, and

I think our return judges can agree that the average skill level of our entrants improved by leaps and bounds. Our last contest netted 0 "winning" entries (those scoring 80% or more of all possible points) and 4 "runners-up" (scoring between 70-80% of points), with the remainder of the anthology coming from a mixture of lower scoring stories submitted to the workshopping process, and the generosity of friends, colleagues, and philanthropists who wanted to support the project. The 2006 contest yielded 2 winning entries (despite a larger and more diverse judging panel) and 11 runners-up, with the most difficult part often being deciding which one of an author's multiple submissions should score marginally higher.

Most of the selected authors have heard from me by this point. If you have not and wish to check your status, email us at [Info@TyrannosaurusPress.com](mailto:Info@TyrannosaurusPress.com).

With the contest behind us, we enter the workshopping phase, a concept unique (I believe) to the *Beacons of Tomorrow* anthology. Judges' comments from the contest are forwarded to the potential contributors, who use them to iron out the wrinkles and polish their stories. Our goal here isn't to dictate how a story should be written. We want to give our contributors feedback from devoted fans of SF, ones who spend a great deal of time analyzing (and nitpicking) over the works of others. By helping our contributors make their stories the best they can be, we help to realize T-Press' founding goal: to help undiscovered talent gain exposure and appreciation for their work.

Stick with us over the months for updates on the anthology, and when *Beacons of Tomorrow v2* is released (tentative release date is early 2008), remember to support your friends in SF.

Thanks again to my volunteer judging panel, to all of the entrants, and most especially to Doug Roper, whose work (along with mine) is only just beginning.

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Some time ago, Bret Funk wrote an article about why Hollywood's treatment of certain cross-over properties either sink or swim at the box office. His main argument was that the proper casting of actors in pivotal roles helped to make for good movies, and it's a valid and strong case. We've all seen bad actors in good films, and what is the first thing we tend to think about when such films are brought up? Of course, it's that one blemish that sticks with us.

I'd like to expand on that argument if I can, since I have been thinking about films quite a lot lately. Yes, casting an appropriate and capable actor in a role can save a mediocre cross-over film, but what attracts actors to projects in the first place? It's the script, and more importantly, the characters.

Many, many films based on novels or comic books in the past have been about the spectacle and the action or the plot. There was little character development or intrapersonal conflict that would attract higher caliber actors and actresses to projects. The first *Punisher* movie is a great example of that. Dolph Lundgren is not the best actor in the world, and the movie itself wasn't all that good, but that movie was fine for him and for 1989, where audiences wanted to see Frank Castle whoop up on the bad guys. Nowadays though, that movie would be laughed out of the studio. Why? It lacks a compelling third dimension. Having never seen the most recent re-make of *The Punisher*, I can't say whether or not the film was better than the first swing, but I am reasonably sure that we spent a good deal more time looking at Frank's struggle with the death of his family than we did watching him shoot countless unwitting henchmen.

Audiences are becoming more sophisticated (despite Hollywood's stubborn tendency to believe otherwise), and the scripts that are coming in based on other cross-over properties are maturing as well. These big action, sci-fi extravaganzas are returning to what endeared the original material to their original audience: the characters. The movies are tending to move away from the situations in the script, and are beginning to focus on the characters involved in those situations.

The Nolan *Batman* is an example of this, and Raimi's *Spiderman* is another. Yes, these are comic book movies, but they excel in their exploration of what it means to be a superhero, and not just showcasing how cool it is to be one. It is this strong and engaging character work that attracted the actors that have filled in the title rolls, Christian Bale and Toby McGwire. Would *Lord of the Rings* have worked if we didn't care about the Fellowship? Of course not. In addition to the raw spectacle of these films, there are very human conflicts and relationships that endear the characters to us, and attract quality actors to the films. Good actors in good roles equal good movies, more often than not.

Another trend that I have noticed (and sincerely hope is on the rise) is the de-emphasis of the highly speculative elements of certain films, mainly "monster movies." My prime example of this is the new Korean monster film, "The Host." Yes, this is a monster movie. There is a giant, mutant beastie running around and wreaking havoc, but the film isn't about that. It's about a small family trying to find one of their own amidst all this mayhem. It's about how these characters are dealing with a personal loss, and how they come together to save what matters most to them. Screw the city or even the country; they want their little girl back. This sounds much more interesting to me than watching Godzilla smash up some buildings and watching walking cookie-cutter plot advancers run around and try to stop him. I want spectacle, but I also want a connection to the events happening onscreen. I think most folks don't even think about that connection during the movie, but they miss it when it's gone.

I sincerely hope that the success of *X-Men*, *Spiderman*, and *The Lord of the Rings* reminds Hollywood that audiences are ready to accept speculative source material in film. Trolls and sorcery and superheroes are fine and dandy, but when given to directors who understand the material, when given to actors who can breathe life into the pages written, the speculative elements fade into the background, become what they have always been intended to be, setting material, instead of the star.

What was your “gateway” into science fiction, superfan Rusty Hevelin asked con goers at ICON? I had to reach back for that information. Certainly the *Star Trek* original series was the first cinema experience on a color television set sporting rabbit ears, sans tinfoil. But was that my gateway to SciFi or the hook?

When I was in the sixth grade, the teachers and parental units realized their daughter could not read. This revelation started a series of tests that determined I was dyslexic. It would later be discovered that a host of other learning disabilities accompanied my problem, resulting in what amounted to guinea pig testing at Rice University at the tender age of twelve that would last for several years—learning how to read, learning how to learn. Oh, yeah, the brain injury from being hit in the head with a real baseball bat at a Christmas piñata party in second grade probably didn’t help.

If I’d never learned to read, would I have been stuck with only visual stimulation for science fiction? I remember struggling in seventh grade with *The Hobbit*, and later with the *Chronicles of Narnia* (and *Trixie Belden* books). Anything I wanted to read, I was encouraged to do so. How long it took was embarrassingly slow—content retention wasn’t my strong point. These books whetted my appetite, but was that the gateway?

I remember my big sister had a long row of sci fi paperbacks in her girlie-décor of a room with author names: Heinlein, Anderson, Bradbury, Doyle. Not ten feet away from my door was a library to die for by today’s standards but meant nothing to me at the time. If I’d never learned to read, and more importantly, enjoyed reading, what then? I remember my first awakening book that was not *The Little Prince* or Tolkein-ish fantasy was *This Perfect Day* (Ira Levin, 1970). True science fiction. That’s when I realized I could visualize the future and learn in 3-D. My gateway? No, but close.

The gateway was my own imagination at the age of about four or five. Not having a vocabulary that included SF, all I knew was that my nightmares weren’t real, but damn, they felt real. My family lived in Norwalk, CT in the late 50s and the parents had a habit of stuffing a pair of undies between the door and the frame of the room I shared with

my sisters to keep us from escaping downstairs after being read the traditional fairy-tale (usually a bit gruesome), kissed on the top of the fuzzy head and tucked in. The light, of course, had to be off. Even though my big sister slept in the same room, she didn’t have a problem with the darkness, but I did. Being trapped in a room with a sadistic sister who liked to tell ghost stories sparked my infantile fears and blew them into full-blown nightmares that culminated one night during a thunderstorm. With panties stuck in the door and the sister apparently oblivious to the light and sound of a pre-hurricane storm, I saw the Devil at my window—horns poking from his temples, red face, pointy little lamp-black goatee and pitch fork—in hair raising clarity I’ve never experienced since. Our room was on the second floor, so I knew he was glaring at me, reveling at my helplessness. I’m sure I wet the bed. The family laughed at my description the next day, but it was real and tangible and small hairs still tingle as I remember this picture, clenched covers in tight-fisted, sweaty little fingers, body pressed into the pillow so that maybe he wouldn’t see me. While carnal knowledge wasn’t the first thing I thought of at the time—moral issues and such—it was the first time that death and horror became real. It was so real that when *The Wizard of Oz* was broadcast in 1959, I couldn’t watch most of it and hid behind the door, peeking out at the pretty parts, cringing at the rest. The flying monkeys reminded me of that nocturnal visit. At the age of four, even I knew that monkeys didn’t fly or talk or serve witches. (Well, I wasn’t quite sure about the serving witches part thanks to a Grimm-loving mother.)

When I realized that Dorothy’s magic slippers weren’t really magic, I was astounded. I was being told a story about a little girl with a dog who got hit on the head in a very nasty storm and while she was asleep, had a dream and all the people she knew were part of that fantastic dream. Without my famous night visitor, I might have never realized that science fiction was what dreams were made of and that the future could be fun and dangerous. The Devil was my gateway to science fiction, *Star Trek* expanded the learning curve and books, specifically *This Perfect Day*, gave me hope and fear that the future could be marvelous or scary. It depended on the weather.

# Page-Turners: What Makes Them, What Breaks Them

by Charles Gramlich

What does it take to suck you into a book so deeply that you lose the real world and *must* keep reading? What kind of book opens in such a way that the first page demands a second, a third, and more? Conversely, what kicks you out of a book early? What lets you toss one book aside and pick up another, or maybe turn to TV instead?

Conversations with various of my writing colleagues has led me to believe that three things are of critical importance in creating a page-turner. These are: 1) Character, 2) Situation, and 3) Quality of Prose. First among them is “Character.”

Great characters will cover up a few sins in situation or prose, but an interesting situation or scintillating prose won't make up very long for shoddily constructed characters. For me, even if I'm attracted to a piece because of a fascinating opening, I'll lose interest quickly if the characters don't click. And though I've read works where the prose sings but the characters and situation don't attract me, I read them slowly and would not pretend that I was “sucked” in by them.

Almost as important as character, however, is “situation,” which is not—I think—the same as plot. Situation is what we are introduced to in the opening few paragraphs, *before* we have time to figure out what the “plot” is going to be. I want a dramatic scene to open a book. I suspect that I put more emphasis on this than some of my writing colleagues, but that most general readers side with me. An author needs to put me immediately into a place where action or emotion, preferably both, abounds.

Unless something is happening on the page when I open a book, I'm not going to spend the time to learn about the “great” characters. And I *cannot* learn much about them from a few lines of opening dialogue. To me, characters are best revealed by what they *do*, not what they say. So please, writers out there, start your characters out “doing” things.

The third component of the page-turner, according to most writer's I've talked to, is high quality prose. I do believe prose quality is important, but I often wonder if it's more appreciated by writers than by the general reading public. For example, *The Da Vinci Code* was *not* beautifully written, and I've

never heard anyone compare Dan Brown as a stylist to Ray Bradbury or Ernest Hemingway. Yet, many people have told me they could not put the book down and that they loved the characters and story.

Personally, I love great prose. I seek it out, turning often to writers such as Cormac McCarthy, James Sallis, and James Lee Burke. I believe, however, that most readers want the story and characters first, and that they are happy if the prose just doesn't get in the way. Sometimes, I'm the same. I didn't feel, for example, that Stephen King's *Misery* was full of artistically composed prose, but that book still ranks as one of the fastest page-turners in *my* history. *Misery* sucked me in and would not let go.

Finally, though, I believe that even the casual reader can appreciate beautiful prose, as long as it doesn't get in the way of the story, and works that click on all three cylinders create the biggest vacuum effect and become the ones that possess our lives until we exorcise them by turning that last page. From my life, this includes such works as:

1. *Ghost Story*, by Peter Straub. It's a long book but I finished it over a weekend. The first scene, the very first sentence, locked me in. There's a young girl in trouble, or so it seems. And there were more great characters in this book than in any other novel I can name. The prose was both delightful *and* chillingly effective. How do you convey the “silence” of snow in words? Straub does it.

2. *Midnight*, by Dean Koontz. Another dramatic opening, even better than in *Ghost Story* because we know at once that it's life and death. The characters, too, are solid, though not as memorable as Straub's. The prose is crafted, and you can feel the effort that Koontz put into getting it just right.

3. *The Road*, by Cormac McCarthy. What could be more dramatic than two survivors, a man and his young son, struggling across a post-apocalyptic wasteland? Every moment is life and death. And the father is so lovingly etched in the way he cares for his son. The characters are absolutely real, and yet still serve as archetypes that engage our deepest emotions. The prose reflects the mood and setting so perfectly that it's almost invisible, but each individual sentence is a jewel.

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# Is Anyone Out There?

by Joe Vadalma

In Science Fiction, alien races are as common as ragweed in September. Yet, although we've been listening for a while with SETI, so far we have detected no signals indicating a technological advanced race in our galaxy. There may be many reasons for this. We may be listening on the wrong frequency, the signals may be too weak to detect, something is blocking the signals, and so forth. I'm discounting the claims of UFOologists since no credible evidence has shown that an alien race has entered our solar system. Does this mean we are alone in the galaxy? A provocative question. The odds are probably that we are not. So how do we estimate the number of advanced civilizations that actually exist? That's what I intend to discuss in this article.

In the first place, there are a hundred billion stars in the galaxy. That would seem to indicate that the odds were heavily in favor of many advanced civilization existing. The question becomes what is the likelihood of an advanced civilization arising on any particular star system. A radio astronomer by the name of Frake Drake came up with the following formula for estimating the number of advanced civilizations:

$$N = R^* \times fp \times ne \times fl \times fi \times fc \times L$$

$N$  is the number of advanced civilizations.

$R^*$  is the average rate of star formation. New stars are being born all the time. So the new additions must be calculated into the formula. Astronomical estimates vary from 2 to 20 a year.

$fp$  is the fraction of stars having planetary system. Until recently, this number would be considered to be a low one by many astronomers. Recently, however, they've discovered that almost all stars have planets. Therefore, this number should be about 95%.

So far, we're doing pretty good. It would seem to be a lot of aliens around. But the next numbers whittled the estimate down quite a bit.

$ne$  is the number of planets with a suitable environment that life could come into being and develop. In our own solar system, the only place that we've found is earth. The planet cannot be too cold or too hot. The moons of the outer planets are too cold, Venus is too hot. It must have liquid water.

Mars, at this time, is too dry. It had liquid water in the past. Did life develop there and die out? That's what we're investigating now with our probes.

As far as an estimate for  $ne$ , all the planets that we've detected around other stars have been gas giants, which cannot possibly sustain life. But that does not mean that small earth like planets do not exist. In fact they probably do, but are too small to detect. Some moons of the gas giants may lie in a habitable zone. Still, out of a hundred billion stars, it would seem to me that at least ten percent would have earth like planets with the right ingredients to form life.

$fl$  is the fraction of habitable planets where life actually came into being. Since modern biology seems to conclude that life would form where the conditions allow it. That would seem to make this number 100%. Not quite. The age of the earth is around 4.5 billion years old. The oldest fossil evidence for life is 3.5 billion years. This may mean that it took a billion years for life to develop. Many stars do not last that long. In fact, at least half expire in much less time. As a result, my guesstimate for this figure would be 50%.

$fi$  is the fraction having intelligent life. This is a tough one. It took about 3.5 billion years for life to evolve into us. Along the way, there were several times when the prevalent life was almost wiped out; some say by giant meteors crashing into earth. What if the dinosaurs had not been wiped out by some catastrophe? Would they have developed intelligence? No one knows. It is very possible that many planets in the galaxy have life forms, but not with enough intelligence to develop sophisticated technology. This must be a very small number.

$fc$  is the fraction having advanced technology. Again, human beings evolved from ape-like creatures around a million years ago. It took us to a million years to develop a technology capable of space travel and radio telescopes. This number is the fraction of intelligent beings having this capability at any given time.

A small digression. Stellar distances are so great that chances are that if we did receive a signal from an alien species, the signal could be as much as 50,000 years old. The aliens who broadcast it might have perished eons ago.

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# Reviews

## **Belladonna**

**Anne Bishop**

Roc, Mar 2007

\$23.95, Hardcover

ISBN: 0451461266

Review by Harriet Klausner

Glorianna Belladonna is happy for her Incubus cousin Sebastian who has found eternal love with his Lynnea. She feared for him when he challenged the Dark Guides, allies of the Eater of the World, but prayed that Lynnea's love would keep him safe, which it did (see *Sebastian*). However, while he basks in the glow of love, she feels a deep boned loneliness that is almost as horrific as her doubts and fear of failure. Still she must overcome her concerns and qualms because she knows in spite of almost everyone considering her a troublesome rogue she must still face The Eater of the World before the darkness spreads fear across all of Ephemera.

However, Glorianna will soon learn that she is not alone. Somehow in her dreams, her needs have traversed Ephemera, reaching the heart and soul of Michael the Musician. He knows he must find the sorceress who has haunted his fantasies as she needs his help while he needs her heart. At the same time his all alone sister Caitlin Marie has become the target of those who support the Eater of the World.

This is an extremely complex fantasy. Newcomers need to first read *Sebastian* to understand all that is going on in this stupendous serpentine story line. Michael is an interesting hero as he finds himself increasingly caught in a Hobson's choice between caging the Eater of the World but by doing so killing his beloved. Anne Bishop writes an incredible epic romantic fantasy in which her heroes are humanoid even with magical skills and other inhuman traits as they fight against overwhelming odds in which any offense they take could mean death for their beloved.

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## **Moonshine**

**Rob Thurman**

Roc, March 2007

\$6.99, Mass Market, 352 pgs.

ISBN: 0451461398

Review by Harriet Klausner

Man's conception of elves is based on the Auphe, but unlike the former, the Auphe were on the highest ring of the supernatural food chain. Unlike the

depiction of elves the Auphe were evil, power hungry and could travel through portals they sliced into the air enabling them travel to different dimensions and different places in the same world. Cal Leandro was a breeding experiment for the Auphe who wanted to destroy earth and replace it with another world.

Cal's humanity suppressed his Auphe heritage, and he withstood everything they threw at him. Now he and his brother Niko are supernatural detectives, and their latest gig is getting close to a certain werewolf to see if he is thinking about making a move against the pack leader Cerberus. Caleb hired them for \$50,000, and when they successfully complete their mission, they learn that Caleb was testing them to find out if they could steal a crown held by Cerebrus. As an incentive to get the brothers to do what he wants, he kidnaps Georgina, a seer and prophet who loves Cal and is the only person besides her brother that he cares about. With the help of a Puck—a supernatural being who loves forever—Niko's vampire lover, and a pack reject, the team works on getting the crown before the deadline is up.

Rob Thurman writes excellent supernatural fantasy in the tradition of Jim Butcher's *The Dresden Files*. Reading about the various supernatural entities is fascinating, as is the way enemies cooperate against a bigger foe. Intricate and fast-paced plotting, well developed characters and a storyline that is actually a sword and sorcery treasure hunt makes *Moonshine* a wonderful reading experience.

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## **Shadowplay**

**Tad Williams**

Daw, Mar 2007

\$26.95, Hardcover

ISBN: 0756403588

Review by Harriet Klausner

Hendon Tolly has claimed the throne of Southmarch. Herndon's cousin, the deposed former ruler King Olin Eddon has been incarcerated in Hierosol. The ex-monarch's royal heir Kendrick is dead, a victim of dark magic. Olin's younger twin offspring has been split apart separately struggling to survive the ordeal of exile with Tolly looking to insure neither can come back by hiring the most lethal mercenary available to insure his cousins never return to claim the crown.

Prince Barrick remains under the spell of Yasammez and the Twilight People behind the Shadowline with his only allies being Captain Ferras Vansen, the Storm Lantern, the mysterious and dangerous fairy Gyir, and Skurn the raven. Princess Briony hides in a forest near

# Reviews

her former home castle where a woods Goddess abets her escape until she joins a traveling troupe of actors, who welcome her unaware that her presence amidst them endangers them. Meanwhile to the south King Autarch may be insane, butw he sees an opportunity to seize Southmarch as chaos reigns.

The second "Shadow" fantasy saga is a superb thriller though it is also the middle book of a trilogy so subplots on the three prime fronts move forward, but are never resolved. The story line is action-packed especially when the focuses are the twins. Though newcomers should read the previous tale (see *Shadowmarch*), fans of Tad Williams will enjoy his complex political fantasy

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## Sixty Days and Counting

**Kim Stanley Robinson**

Bantam, Mar 2007

\$25.00, Hardcover

ISBN: 0553803131

Review by Harriet Klausner

Phil Chase is elected president of the United States because of his environmental platform though it might be too late as the climate has been devastated to the point that it behaves erratic with incredible swings. Still the upbeat President Chase insists it is not over yet that we can turn it around, but no longer can politicians hide in a bush from An Inconvenient Truth that doing nothing means the death of the third world from the sun.

Chase sets things in motion with the biggest government effort since FDR; perhaps even greater than the Great Depression WWII battles. Things look a bit more positive when the stagnant Gulf Stream begins recirculating but that will not be enough to save our planet. He has brought together a top rate team of experts to end the trend of a speeding death and beyond that bring life back to earth. Charlie Quibler is on the squad though that means he no longer can spend as much time as he needs to with son. National Science Foundation scientist Frank Vanderwal is still recovering from a brain injury suffered when he and his beloved espionage agent Caroline Barr prevented a conspiracy to steal the election from Chase, and Caroline is now also on the team. However, as they seek scientific solutions and the President seeks the political will to do the tough decisions, others like the status quo that leaves them with affluence and power not caring about saving the earth, as they will be dead before the planet's final death.

## Is Anyone Out There? (con't)

Which brings us to *L*, which is the average lifetime of an intelligent species. During the 1950s we came close to destroying ourselves in an atomic war. Many believe that we will pollute ourselves to extinction. A comet or asteroid could crash into the earth and destroy us. A terrible unstoppable plague could wipe us out. As you can see, intelligent species can perish. How often this happens is anyone's guess. Once advanced technology is reached, how long does an intelligent species last? Millions of years? Thousands? Hundreds? Tens? Your guess is as good as mine. So far we've managed to survive the twentieth century. Can we survive the twenty-first?

For more information on Drake's equation and the possibility of life in other star systems, go to the web site *Astrobiology*, which has, among a wealth of information, a calculator where you can plug in various numbers to determine how many possible alien civilizations exist in the Milky Way galaxy using various parameters.

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## Page-Turners (con't)

4. *Drive*, by Jim Sallis. It begins with a man in a motel room, dying it seems, with bodies and a gun close to hand. It's the perfect noir opening, and the character, who is known only as "Driver," is developed with loving intensity. Sallis's prose also never fails to satisfy, even here where it is stripped down to its bare essentials in service of the story.

5. *To Tame a Land*, by Louis L'Amour. The opening scene shows a boy and his father standing beside their broken down wagon in Indian country as the rest of the wagon train rolls past. I'm hooked, but we see the boy, Rye Tyler, grow to be a man in a harsh land. And L'Amour's prose, while not quite up to that of McCarthy or Sallis, lets us feel the loneliness of the prairie, lets us see the blue mountains and the midnight stars.

Any of these books is worth study by those who want to see how the elements of Character, Situation, and Prose can be combined into a seamless meld that catches readers like a bear trap. I'm sure there are many other works deserving of consideration. Don't all readers have such lists? Check yours. Reread one or two of them. Let another writer's world take you over. You'll come back better able to take other readers to *your* worlds. Make them turn that page.