



The Illuminata

Delving Deep Into The Worlds of Science Fiction and Fantasy

Let's Start At The Very Beginning...

By Bret Funk

As my abilities as a writer mature, I cringe at the thought of my earlier works, unpolished, unprofessional (and in my opinion, unreadable). As I gain experience as a publisher, I realize mistakes that were made in the production of books and wonder how things might have worked out if I had had a better understanding of both the business and the craft when I started. What upsets me the most is that I'm sure I'll feel the same way five years from now when looking back on this period of my literary evolution.

Excitement at the prospect of producing our own books caused us to make some hasty decisions, rush a few things that might have been better off sitting idle, and take a number of shortcuts. Some shortcuts were taken from necessity. For instance, we could not (and can not for the foreseeable future) afford to hire one of the better experienced and more expensive

copy-editors, whose rates often exceed the amount spent for production of each book. The end result? *Path of Glory*, though still enjoyed by readers and critics, has a significant number of simple typographical and grammatical mistakes, so many that I get frustrated every time I flip through the pages.

Is there a bright side? Sure. Embarrassment over what I see as my own failings forced me to focus more on my abilities as an editor. It also forced me to seek

alternate, less expensive methods of editing. The *Beacons of Tomorrow* anthologies are a direct result of my desire to hone those editorial tools (and our first profitable, if only marginally, venture), and the intervening years have seen each of my books written in a progressively more concise and error-free style. I have gained a greater appreciation for the technical aspects of writing, and though I still have a great distance to travel down that road, I believe my writing has improved as a result.

I now find myself forced to examine some of the more marketable aspects of writing, those elements that capture a reader's attention and hold them through the end. Those aspects that make readers scour bookstore shelves for more of your works, and complain to the front desk when they aren't there. In this quest, I found myself drawn inexorably to the beginning.

Beginnings, particularly in epic fantasy, pose a conundrum to authors. Many fantasy writers have a detailed view of their complex, multi-cultural world and they believe their first priority is to envelope the reader in that world, teach them a little bit about the society and political situation, showcase the cleverly-created races and species, and introduce some depth to the main characters. This *is* important, but it is not the most important element of a beginning.

I'll use Tolkien and Lord of the Rings as an example. I am a fan of Tolkien's. I admire the depth and level of detail at which he envisioned Middle Earth. I am also a fan of fantasy literature. Yet it took me several attempts and more than five years to read all three volumes of Lord of the Rings. Why? Because of the beginning. I was so bored by his introduction and subsequent jaunting through the Shire that I never made it beyond page 100. It was only after I forced myself

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USF instructors aren't necessarily in the classroom. They share the internet, the panel, the stage. And they don't give grades. They give caveats and dump information on their listeners/students via Q & A sessions and online websites/workshops, then return to their lives or in the case of Tamara Siler Jones and Mikey Zucker Richert, back to their Iowa farms to quietly ply the written word to their whim.

From Professor Tamara, I learned about being a new author with an agent and eager publisher who just published her third book in a series. Tamara works a regular job and has a degree in Graphic Arts. Not only a writer, but a quilter, she finds time to create after her children are in bed. She writes sci-fi/fantasy forensic novels and has advice for the beginning novice. During publishing panels at conventions, she shares her experience and offers what worked for her and how the publishing game is played. I sat willingly at her feet and soaked up wisdom by the buckets-full.

Her main cry is: Get An Agent. Her agent is the one who answers publisher's questions. Some (few) publishers will accept unsolicited manuscripts, but to get to others, you need an agent. "You want a New York City agent." She suggests researching Association of Artists' Representatives for more information and "don't use anyone that charges a reading fee or refers to a reading service that does [charge a fee]."

At first, she sent 20 query letters and only kept the ones who responded. "Some agencies only want a query letter, some want more." Her advice for the query letter is to be businesslike. "You are approaching a busy person. Four sentences is okay; give them no reason to say 'no'. Mention everything you've ever sold to another publisher."

The secret, she confided, is to develop one-sentence synopsis and always be ready to verbalize your project. Also, include a 1-2 page synopsis, double spaced, courier and condenses but only include *action* and *plot* points—no motive. It seems odd to withhold explanations—motivation or emotions, but Professor Tamara swears by it.

Her agent wanted 3 chapters immediately. "Some agencies want an exclusive, meaning you only send to one publisher—no one else sees it. An exclusive is anything sent over three chapters."

Online workshops can be helpful though she cautioned, "anything put online is considered 'already published' and a reprint. If you utilize an online workshop/website and you post your work—be

careful. You may exclude yourself from publishing on hard copy."

Once an agent has helped with negotiations for publishing, Tamara offers little known information to the newby. There is a difference between an advance and royalty check. An advance is an advance payment of royalty. But if royalty checks are issued, you don't really get the money unless the advance is repaid. Royalty checks come every six months. Agents typically get 15%. Ten percent of any royalties go to her copy editor. She is not allowed to read other people's work even though she gets many requests by writer-wanna-bes. The reason is that publishers don't want to get sued because of an accusation that you used their idea. Tamara Siler Jones is the author of the *Dubric Byerly* mysteries.

Fellow Iowan, Mikey Zucker Reichert, also speaks publicly about writing at conventions as a USF adjunct professor. Mikey is amazing! She is a physician, loves animals and children, has facilitated a writer's workshop for over ten years and is only in her mid-forties. Mikey can be intense and has definite ideas about writing and publishing. But as the author of over twenty books, scads of short fiction plus writing for *Fantastic*, she speaks candidly from successful experience.

Mickey's style is matter-of-fact and suggests that people mostly write about themselves. "Writing is not supposed to be fun for you, the writer, but for the reader." Her preference is to write in third person limited, keeping the same POV in the scene and not jump around with other character's heads. "The reader needs a compass." During the panel/class she gave her slant on other points of view and why she doesn't use them: Multiple points of view are not to be used. She warns about using present tense. As for first person? "It means they survived if they write in first person."

She likes to give her characters depth and rarely uses contractions. She doesn't feel that a writer can "overdo" describing character emotions, "even guys". Flippant or macho is okay in detective novels, but not usually for sci-fi.

With sex scenes, she likes to let the reader's imagination finish the scene and prefers to "fade to black" rather than try for detail. "Leave a lingering impression of how they feel afterwards."

Using an outline with a few guidelines is her preferred method, using the mantra, Thought-Action-Speech/Motivation-Reaction-Sequencing. "If you

The Writer's Block: Curse of the Lazy Ending

by Charles Gramlich

Ending a book well is hard, but it's perhaps the most important part of the writer's job. One reason is that, while the opening sells your first book, the ending sells the second. From a marketing standpoint, good endings are what establish a writer's career.

Even more important, however, is that the ending is where you pay off the readers who have stayed with you through the entire work. They've put their time in. They've trusted you as you've led them along the path you've paved. They expect you to deliver on the promises of your opening.

Two books I've finished recently failed to deliver, at least in my estimation. Both were pretty big sellers, although one was much bigger than the other, and I've very much enjoyed previous works by both writers. This time I was disappointed. And here's why. (Names are left out to protect the guilty.)

Book 1: The hero is cornered by the villain in a dank storm drain at the end. The villain has a gun, and the drop. She's a bit over the top as a character, but we know she's vicious and ready to kill. The hero is a bit more bumbling but has shown amazing resourcefulness throughout. So, how does the author resolve the situation? Surprise! A wild animal attacks the villain from behind and kills her. Our hero is then pursued by one of her henchmen, who we've spent very little time with, for another few short chapters before the actual end. It seemed pretty anti-climactic to me.

To be fair, the reader *had* seen the tracks of the wild animal earlier in the book. It didn't come completely out of the blue, and a friend of mine who read the same book said the ending didn't bother her. It disappointed me, however, and I had to read that section over a couple of times to make sure that what I thought had happened did *indeed* happen.

Book 2: The hero and his friends are pursued by a witch who is well developed as a powerful and savage antagonist. She has killed and "eaten" a child for goodness sake. We've seen her transform into an eagle, and a dragon, and have seen her take on a variety of human forms. She

has possessed souls left and right who now do her bidding. And so at last the witch faces the hero. He steps toward her, and with a single blow of his sword *cuts off her head*, freeing all the souls she's captured and finishing the final battle before it has properly begun.

Yes, the hero *had* been shown to possess supernatural powers. I assumed that was why the author spent so much time developing the witch into a worthy adversary. Only, she wasn't worthy. She was barely a nuisance to the hero. I've had more trouble swatting mosquitoes.

I have no idea why these normally fine writers ended these two books with such clunkers. Maybe they were just being lazy, or maybe they were distracted or exhausted from the intrusions of real life. Maybe they thought the endings really worked. Whatever the reason, they made *this* reader a little less likely to pick up their next book, and if these had been the *first* books I'd read by them then I certainly wouldn't buy more.

These writers forgot two simple rules for endings. The writer of book 1 forgot that heroes must resolve conflicts themselves and cannot be "rescued" by fate. This type of implausible ending is often referred to as *Deus ex machina* (God from the machine), and it was criticized as far back as Aristotle. The author of book 2 forgot that defeating the villain must be 'difficult' for the hero. Readers expect heroes to win, but they expect them to suffer for their victories. When the hero faced the witch in the climax, I first felt tension. Then I felt cheated.

How am I supposed to feel when I see these two authors' next books on the shelf? Should I give them my money? Should I give them my time? It's not going to be easy to convince me now.

My stories run up and bite me on the leg-I respond by writing down everything that goes on during the bite. When I finish, the idea lets go and runs off.

— Ray Bradbury

Fraction of Stars Having Planetary Systems

by Joe Vadalma

In discussions about concerning the possible number of technological advanced civilizations in our galaxy (the Milky Way galaxy), it is convenient to use Drake's Equation (named after the astronomer who thought it up, Frake Drake). It is:

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

where: N is the number of technological advanced civilizations

R^* is the average rate of star formation

fp is the fraction of stars having planetary systems

ne is the number of planets having a suitable environment

fl is the fraction of planets actually having life

fi is the fraction of planets having intelligent life

fc is the fraction of planets where the life form has advanced technology

l is the average lifetime of an advanced civilization

It's only in recent years that astronomers have the ability to detect extra solar planets at all. What they are finding is that of the main sequence stars that are near enough to determine whether they have planets, most do. The last time I checked 135 planetary systems have been found with a total of 159 planets. Probably by now, there are many more.

Detecting planets of stars is difficult. The main difficulty is that the light of the star is so bright that it overshadows any light reflected back by a planet at the distances of the stars. Hence, methods other than direct observation must be used. Also, so far the only planets detected need to be massive in order to be detected at all; most are gas giants such as Jupiter and Saturn. Many are larger than Jupiter.

One method of detection is possible because the gravity of its planets cause a star to wobble slightly. This star motion can be detected with the Doppler Effect. The light coming from a star moving toward the Earth is Doppler shifted to bluer (shorter) wavelengths, while a star receding from the Earth emits light shifted to redder (longer) wavelengths. The effect is small. For instance Jupiter induces a 12 m/s velocity change on the Sun for an external observer whereas the Saturn effect is only 2.7 m/s.

It has been found that the percentage of stars that have planets rises with iron abundance. In all, 754 stars were grouped according to their iron content

relative to the sun. After grouping the stars according to iron abundance, each group of stars was examined for the presence of planets by the Doppler technique (California and Carnegie Planet Search). It showed that stars with large amounts of iron are more likely to harbor planets than iron-poor stars.

Scientists now believe that planet formation is an aspect of star formation. The process begins with the gravitational collapse of a vast cloud of gas and dust. The central condensation accretes infalling material, shrinks, and later becomes a star. Material that does not fall into the star forms a disk. The rotation of the original cloud is preserved in the revolution of the disk and the rotation of the star. After a few tens of thousands of years, the dust sinks to the midplane of the disk, forming a dense sheet. Within this sheet, the dust clumps together and agglomerates into larger objects, called planetesimals, which collide and build up to Earth-size planets and the cores of giant planets like Jupiter, Saturn, Neptune, and Uranus. Next, these bodies can accrete atmospheres. Finally, the disk's residual gas and dust dissipate by being either blown away by stellar winds or accreted onto planets. Newborn stars are surrounded by embryonic material. Youthful stars have flattened disks in which planets may be forming. Older stars have diffuse dusty envelopes that may harbor mature planets.

Most astronomers today believe that planetary systems are common occurrences around other stars. The next few years will provide quantitative information on the distribution of planetary masses and distances from parent stars for planets with sizes between Jupiter and Uranus and, with micro-lensing measurements, down to Earth size. With these data in hand, theoreticians will begin to form a coherent picture of the process of planet formation. Answering the question of whether Earth-sized planets are common or rare will require more sophisticated instruments than are available currently.

For much more detailed information on this topic go to [NASA's Origin Program web site.](#)

Science fiction reflects scientific thought; a fiction of things-to-come based on things-on-hand.

— Benjamin Appel

Reviews

The Name of the Wind

Patrick Rothfuss

Daw, Apr 2007

\$24.95, Hardcover, 904 pgs.

ISBN: 075640407X

Review by Harriet Klausner

As a child, Kvothe traveled with his parents from town to town as part of a troupe giving performances. His parents were quite talented, had the patronage of a lord, and stopped at only the best places. The troupe added Abertino who taught Kvothe much about his magic and was quite surprised how easily the lad picked up his lessons. After his mentor leaves the troupe, Kvothe decides to attend the University where he can obtain formal lessons in the use of magic. However his life is shattered after returning from a long solo walk to ponder his future; he finds everyone including his parents dead, killed by the Chandrian because his dad was collecting knowledge on them so that he could write a song about them.

A traumatized Kvothe heads for the big city where he becomes a homeless vagabond who is picked on by everyone who lives on the streets. Still he does what he must to stay alive until he finally reaches the University. Three days later he is moved into the Arcanum, the school of magic where he makes an enemy of an older student Ambrose, who makes Kvothe's life miserable, which escalates until he jeopardizes the newcomer's life. Kvothe has had enough and gets Ambrose in trouble with the school authorities. Some call him a hero; others a killer as his legend has just begun.

This is a complex enthralling "biographical" fantasy that will stun sub-genre fans with its vividness and depth; it's as if Patrick Rothfuss has written numerous thrillers instead of just one. Kvothe's youthful tale is told mostly by him as he ventures forth once his beloved parents and the rest of those in his "world" are murdered. Readers will appreciate this strong saga of a young hero's salad days while looking forward to further escapades of Kvothe in "day two" of his story to the Chronicler.

White Night

Jim Butcher

Roc, April 2007

\$23.95, Hardcover, 416 pgs.

ISBN 0451461401

Review by Harriet Klausner

If someone told Chicago wizard Harry Dresden that he would one day be a warden in the White Council of Wizards, he wouldn't have believed them. Many of the council think he is too much of a troublemaker, but because of the war with the Red Court Vampires, the ranks of the powerful wizards are needed elsewhere. Harry had no choice but to accept the mantle of responsibility.

His friend Sargent Murphy calls him to look at a dead woman. He opens his inner sense to find she was murdered and was a mid level practitioner of magic. When another corpse is found dead, killed in the same manner by someone, who left her to die, Harry believes it has something to do with the White Court Vampires who feed on emotions rather than the blood like their red court cousins. This makes no sense to Harry because the white court is seeking peace with the wizard's council. Across the country at least thirty-six others are killed in the same manner. It soon becomes evident that some of the white court members don't want to make peace with the wizards and at each scene men in a grey suit that the warden's wear is seen. If the peace treaty is to take effect Harry and his allies have to find out who the rebels are and defeat them in the traditional manner.

Each novel starring Harry Dresden is better than the one that precedes it as Jim Butcher is a great world builder who makes the reader believe the hidden supernatural community is very real. Harry has changed and grown with the passage of time and now is part of the establishment that once wanted to destroy him. He handles responsibility with a dry wit and self deprecating humor.. As Dresden goes the TV route, Mr. Butcher is a first class talent in the supernatural mystery fantasy genre as this book shows he remains true to his protagonist's roots.

Reviews

Claimed by Shadow

Karen Chance

Roc, Apr 2007

\$7.99, Mass Market

ISBN: 0451461525

Review by Harriet Klausner

The Pythia is the earth's most powerful clairvoyant, but it is the power of the title that chooses the heir. Although Cassandra Palmer's mentor was out of the running for the position because she did something horrific, the vampire Mercia believes Cassandra would be the one. Mercia places a geas on his ward to drive men away so that the young woman can be the Pythia since the ritual requires a virgin. Mercia has to choose someone to complete the power by making love to Cassandra.

The Sylver Circle, a coven of mages, and the Senate, who represent the vampires, want to control Cassandra who was brought up in a vampiric court. The vamps assume she will turn to them to guide her, but Cassandra is her own woman and plans to control her destiny, especially if she can find the one male who she can mate with so she can complete the ritual and become the Pythia. Cassandra follows Myra, the initiate who flunked out, back in time to 1888 England and into the realm of Fairy as she knows she will only be safe if her enemy dies, though all she wants to do is neutralize her jealous foe.

Karen Chance is a great writer of supernatural fantasy that is on a par with the works of Kim Harrison, Charlaine Harris and Kelly Armstrong. Her heroine is one of the most powerful women in the sub-genre as she makes her own way with a deep desire to use her powers do it her way guided by her ethics. There is so much action in *Claimed By Shadow* that readers will not stop until finished.

Forged by Fire

Janine Cross

Roc, Apr 2007, \$14.00

ISBN 0451461282

Review by Harriet Klausner

Though the Dragon Temple forbids females from owning property, Zarq Darquel ignores the tenet. Instead she makes a home for herself by purchasing a dragon-egg farm in Clutch Xxamer Zu. She also struggles with her craving for addictive dragon venom while finding herself nurturing the young victims of the repressive regime.

Meanwhile her former overlord Waikar Re Kratt, outraged by her behavior even before she defied the ruling paternal oligarchy, is coming for her. He wants her incarcerated at the least but his real goal is to see her dead. Forced to react, Zarq flees into the jungle lair of the dragons where accompanied by her female dragons, she seeks an ancient power to defeat Kratt and his male priestly supporters of the status quo.

The final book of the Dragon Temple fantasy trilogy (see *Touched By Venom* and *Shadowed By Wings*) is a vivid dark fantasy starring an intriguing heroine struggling with an addiction. Ironically, her only hope of survival is to use the venom that she craves. The story line is action-packed as Zarq lands in one nasty escapade after another. While not for everyone since this tale and miniseries is graphic, Janine Cross provides a deep look at the crippling impact of sexism, racism, slavery, addiction, and oppression in a wonderful over the top saga.

USF (con't)

have an outline, you'll never get writer's block." Rather than fighting over commas, she suggested to 're-think' the sentence. When needed, she will write new chapters rather than keeping and editing the same chapter. "Create a scene bank with all the scenes that were brilliant, but needed to be cut from the book. Save these for another time."

As for publishing, Mickey cautions that there are many reasons why an editor rejects a story. Don't take it personally. Some publishers want it (manuscript) in increments or the whole thing. "Don't bother sending SASE for the manuscript. Never use a disk. Get used to having the manuscript thrown away." Also, be sure and have the title and page number on every page. Similar to Professor Tamara, Mickey sends the first 3 chapters and the outline, starting with chapter 4.

A few authors she suggested that writer-wannabes research are: Dwight D Swain—Techniques of the Selling Writer, ("Published writers read his stuff!"), Janny Wurst's "early stuff is good with description", and Poul Anderson is "good sci-fi, well styled." Conversely, "Stephen Donaldson reads like a telephone book."

Both professors grace University classes periodically. Students in the writing class have real-life opportunity to learn the tricky art writing and publishing. Learning from these two women was inspiring and I took copious notes. Next month, a quick report on writing about medieval times, military writing and screenplays with Mickey Zucker Reichert, Joe Haldeman, C.S. Friedman and Gyno Dykstra.

Beginnings (con't)

to read no matter how tedious the story became that I found out it was actually really good. The remaining 900 or so pages I finished in a couple of days.

What could Tolkien have done different? I have no idea. But I do know that a story in which something happens right away is far more likely to hold a reader's attention than one filled with exposition and backstory. The details of the world and characters can (and should) be woven through the narrative, not dumped on the reader in an effort to get it all out of the way.

There are several ways to induce reader interest at the beginning of a work. The most obvious is to start with some action directly related to the plot of the story. Following the attack, or rescue, or whatever device is used, a slower period of narrative can highlight the most important aspects of world-building before the adversary rears his head again. This method is often used to good effect, but I personally prefer something more subtle than having the bad guy or his henchmen burst through the door in the first five pages of an epic.

Another method is to have an action sequence unrelated to the main plot occur in the opening sequence. This event can drive two protagonists together, bring the protagonist and antagonist into the same scene without a direct confrontation, or provide the motivator that gets one of the major players off their butts and out into the world. I attempted to use a modification of this method, in conjunction with another technique, when I wrote *Path of Glory*.

A third option for opening a book in such a way as to excite readers and pique their curiosity is to open the work with a sequence outside of the main story arc. Preface... Prelude... Remembrance... Whatever it is called, this scene captures some vital event concurrent to the main storyline or in the world's history. It can be used to foreshadow events, pose a mystery that readers will want to hang around to solve, or just cause enough murder and mayhem to appease our innate bloodlust. This was my method of choice for the *Boundary's Fall*

series, and I think if I had followed it up better, then I wouldn't be as dissatisfied with the pacing of the series' opening chapters.

What I forgot, and what I think many talented but not exceptional authors forget, is that the beginning of a book doesn't stop at the end of the first chapter. Yes, those first few pages are the hook that grabs a reader, but if you let your fist unclench a little too much in the subsequent chapters, they might get away. Worse, they might never come back.

If I had the chance to do it again, I would follow up the opening sequence in my first book with a more concise introduction to the characters and a faster return to full-blown action. Character development should be done throughout the work; it's not necessary to fill readers in on everything that's happened prior to meeting a character, nor is it necessary to paint a painstaking portrait of strengths, weaknesses, vices and virtues. All of those things follow the character throughout the story and should be portrayed through action and dialogue rather than excessive exposition from the narrator.

From a publisher's standpoint, beginnings are a key marketing factor. For an author, beginnings represent something even more profound. They are your introduction to readers, their first glimpse into your imagination. A great book, even just a great idea, might be able to offset the weaknesses of a poor opening, but like any other first impression, overcoming reader preconceptions is far more difficult than impressing them off the bat.

I am free, no matter what rules surround me. If I find them tolerable, I tolerate them; if I find them too obnoxious, I break them. I am free because I know that I alone am morally responsible for everything I do.

— Robert A. Heinlein