How to Become a Millionaire Children's Author

LESSON TEN

by

Scott Thornton

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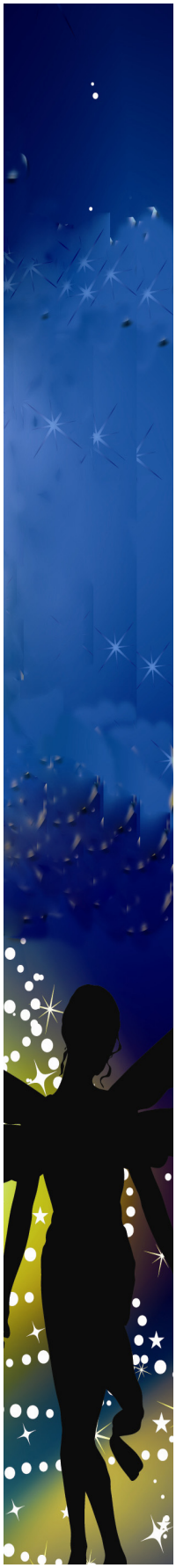


Welcome and a huge 'Thank You' for purchasing 'Lesson Ten' of the twelve part course, 'How to Become a Millionaire Children's Author'.

Let's continue with the hottest and latest insider tips and techniques you can use to build your own personal wealth from writing for children.

Writing Fantasy and Science Fiction

These two interlinked genres are probably the most popular in children's fiction, and thus offer the prospect of substantial earnings to any writer who can gather an army of devotees.

Terry Pratchett is, without doubt, one of the most successful writers of books read by children and teenagers, and equally without doubt has to be in the millionaire bracket as a result. Fantasy and science fiction are often the only fiction many boys will read at all, and they carry this enthusiasm into adult life.

There are many common elements that apply to both fantasy and science fiction, so before we consider the areas in which they differ, we will look first at the similarities. It can be difficult to decide how to classify some books, since the boundary between science and magic can be very narrow.

The Similarities of Both Genres

Some people claim that magic is merely something that we cannot yet explain by current scientific knowledge. Or to put it another way, that the difference between the two is merely a matter of the sophistication of the beholder.

If you were transported back four hundred years wearing a digital wrist watch with an alarm function that went off in a public place, the people around you would be convinced that it was magic, and nothing you could say would change their minds.

There are some things that can only be magic:

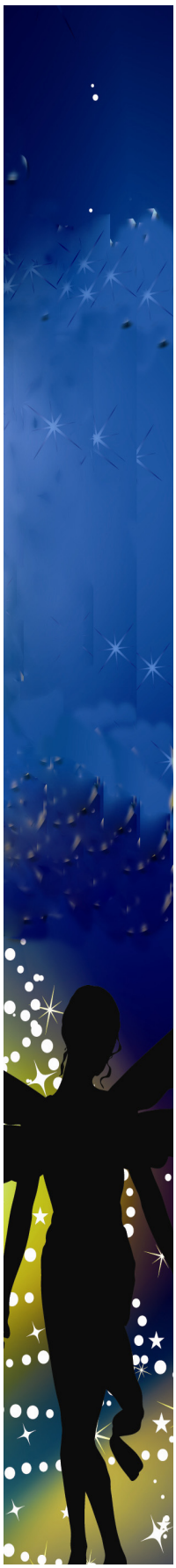
- The ability to pull fire from the air.
- The ability to talk to animals as though they were human.
- The ability to fly unaided or to become invisible at will.

These are standard devices in **fantasy stories, where the basic premise is that magic works.**

Other things appear in science fiction, but also in fantasy where they are viewed as magical powers.

For example:

- Telepathy.
- Psychokinesis.



- Precognition.

Talking animals also appear in science fiction, but there they are given a scientific basis as genetic mutations, either accidental or deliberate.

Setting

In both genres, the **setting** is of prime importance, as it is the strangeness of other worlds that forms a large part of the attraction. It should not take over so completely that you forget the other elements of story-telling, even if it is a story of your characters battling to escape from a strange and hostile environment.

You must never give characterisation and plotting a position of low importance.

On the other hand, it is not as simple as quickly creating a strange world that depends on its strangeness to be believable. Whether the world you create is mythical or an alien planet, **it must still function according to some basic laws that operate in a logical fashion**.

Children learn about plate tectonics, mountain building, ice ages and all the other aspects of geomorphology (the study of the formation of planets) at an early age; and they learn about evolution from their passion for dinosaurs even earlier.

How to Build a New World

It takes time, thought and a certain amount of background knowledge to build a credible world. The best way to start is by drawing maps, blocking in the general land-forms and then adding the special features that your plot requires. Maps are a common feature of these books, so keep in mind that you will need to supply one to your publisher.

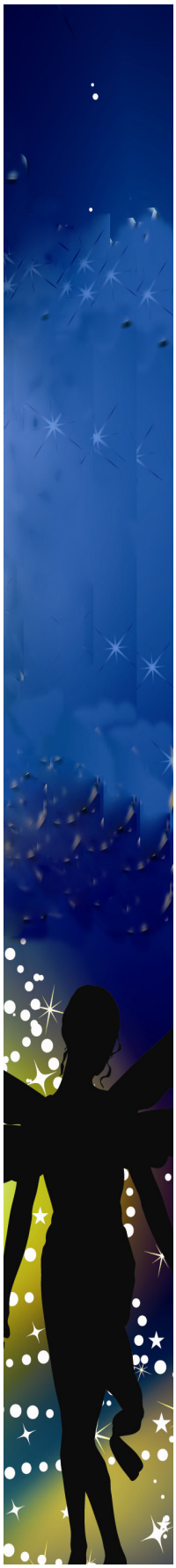
No matter what special features you need, do avoid the dreadful mistakes that some beginner writers perpetrate. To help you with this, the main areas of mistakes made are concerning:

- Mountains.
- Swamps.
- Caves.

Mountains

For example, mountains are only formed in two ways:
Being pushed up where tectonic plates collide; or by volcanic action.

Volcanoes also occur on plate margins. The exception is when the plate on which they stand has passed over a 'hot-spot', which is a thin place in the mantle that allows lava to well up constantly, forming volcanoes on whichever



portion of the plate is above them. This does not happen as a one-off, but as a chain of volcanoes as the plate moves along. The Hawaiian islands were, and still are, formed in this way.

So do not create a single mountain in the middle of an otherwise dead flat country.

Swamps

Swamps require a body of water that cannot escape downhill fast enough to drain them, so they have to be in a depression, and not on the side of a hill! Not only that, they have to be sheltered from both the sun and a strong air-flow, either of which would dry them up.

Swamps in open, flat, desert areas do occur, but they normally dry up to a fraction of their maximum size in the dry season, and extend in the wet season. This restricts the type and number of creatures that you can use to inhabit swamps.

Caves

Caves are formed in three ways:

- By the action of water, which dissolves the rock, as in limestone; or which wears it away, as on sea-coasts.
- By the action of wind and sand, as in sandstone.
- From gas bubbles in lava flows which then solidify leaving a chamber where the gas bubble was.

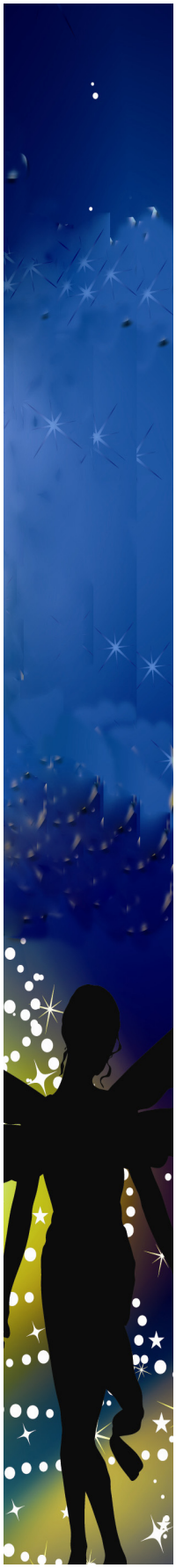
Animals that live in caves do not usually dig them, they just utilise what is there, including man-made caves such as abandoned mines. There is a high degree of likelihood that a predator will inhabit any good cave (good caves being hard to come by...). Do not let your characters blithely go into caves without checking them first very carefully unless of course, you want a bear (or alien equivalent) to chase them.

Naming and Populating a New World

Having created your world, you then have to name it and its inhabitants, whether they be animal, vegetable or mineral. Here again, **your chosen names must be believable and have some form of logic to them.**

For science fiction worlds where humans have been involved in the naming, current conventions can be followed:

- **Stars** tend to be named after people or creatures from classical mythology, and when planets are first discovered by space explorers, they tend to designate them by the name of the star with a number added to show which orbital position they occupy, e.g. Alpha Centauri III would be the third planet out from the star Alpha Centauri.
- People usually only name **planets** when they inhabit them.



Settlers from Earth may give them whimsical names, such as We-Made-It, or follow tradition and call them New Cambia or Jenkins' World. Cities and towns can have names like Toonerville or Sanctuary, while we tend to name mountains and rivers either after the people who discovered them or by some feature that strikes their discoverers, like Snake River or Green Mountain.

More difficult is the naming of planets where the inhabitants are not human. It is an accepted convention, based on human experience, that planets are given the same name as the surface of which they seem to be formed (e.g. Earth) and that the name which the aliens have for themselves equates to 'the people'.

With this, and the naming of people, animals and plants, your problem is to find words that are sufficiently different without having to resort to gruntable monosyllables like Thag or Zork, or ludicrous polysyllables composed mainly of z's, x's, and q's like Xqwrezenczion.

Here are some techniques to use to name your imaginary world and all its inhabitants and ecological life.

Technique One

Take parts of two different words and join them (for example, **Robert Silverberg's** food crop lusavender; a combination of lucerne and lavender).

Technique Two

Keep an eye out for typographical errors that create a pronounceable word.

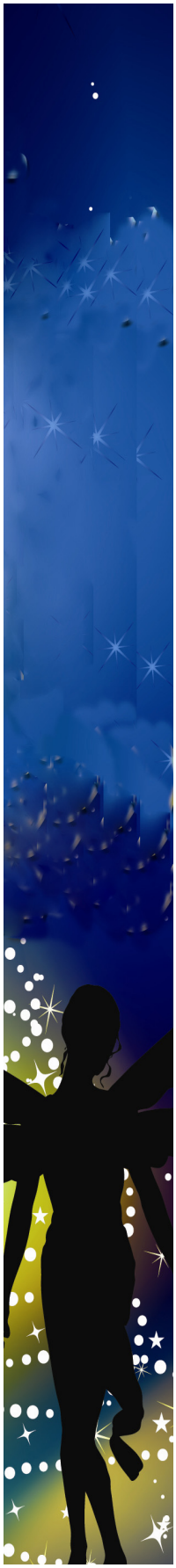
For example:

- Keet
- Kree
- Evvots
- Creafe

Any of these words would be perfectly good names for plants, animals or people.

Technique for Naming Plants

Think of country names for things, like the puff-ball, which puffs dried spores into the air when you kick it. How about a carnivorous plant that captures its victims by releasing a narcotic vapour when bruised? It could be named, Tramplefume.



Technique for Naming Alien Creatures

Think of the lyre-bird, named for its tail, or fat-tailed sheep, sea anemones, sea horses, road runners, bee orchids; and apply the same principle to alien creatures.

Here are some examples of ideas:

- **The Piano-player**, a type of lizard that sits on its haunches by a rotting branch, pressing its front feet on the branch to drive out the bugs it eats.
- **The Stilt-wing**, a swamp creature that seems to consist of no more than very long legs and one big wing.
- **The Night-barker**, a harmless little rodent that frightens the unsuspecting by its loud defensive bark.
- **The Hoover Bear**, a large shaggy creature that feeds by applying its wide muzzle to the ground and sucking hard as it walks forward.

Any of those creatures would be at home on an alien planet or in a fantasy world.

Another good source of names for fantasy books are **words that are no longer in common usage,** and an advantage with these is that they can be resurrected to use for their original purpose.

Examples:

- Sallow is an old name for willow, so a basket-maker could be called **Sallowman**.
- Orts, is a medieval word meaning left-overs. Someone who makes a living by begging at kitchen doors could have the name of **Ort-eater**.

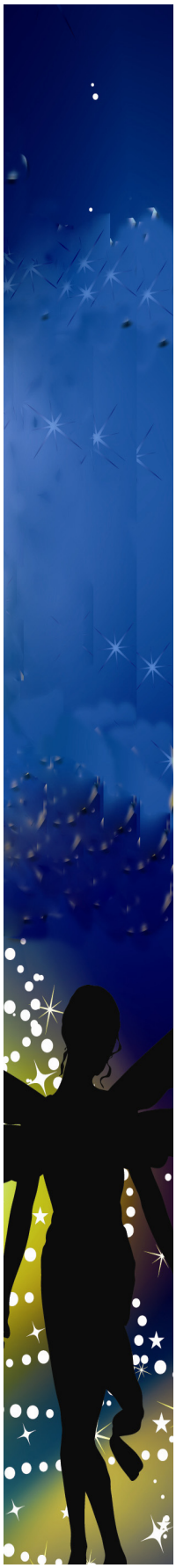
Fantasy

There are six basic types of fantasy stories:

- Folk Stories.
- Epic Fantasy.
- Semi-fantasy.
- Good versus evil in modern settings.
- Ultra modern fantasies.

Folk stories

These are the childhood stories, such as Hansel and Gretel, Beauty and the Beast, Jack and the Beanstalk, where ordinary people find themselves dealing with the results of magic.



A modern example is, **'The Conjurer's Game'** by **Catherine Fisher** (The Bodley Head) in which the characters flit between the prosaic present and fantastic past as a chessboard comes to life.

Epic Fantasy

Most of these stories are based on Celtic or Norse myths, where brave heroes do battle with dragons and evil sorcerers. Many of these stories owe their genesis to **Tolkien's 'Lord of the Rings'** (Allen & Unwin). If you haven't yet read this classic you should do so before you start thinking of writing fantasy yourself as many of the very best ideas have already been used in this epic adventure..

It has all the ingredients of an epic fantasy:

- An evil sorcerer.
- Troll-like soldier creatures called orcs.
- Friendly elves.
- A wise wizard.
- Talking trees.
- An epic journey through difficult terrain to save the world from the forces of evil.

It is a masterpiece of beautifully written, easily readable, grammatical English. A more recent example is **'The Snow Walker's Son'** by **Catherine Fisher** (Bodley Head) which involves intrigue, banishment and sorcery; an ice-cold winter and an unseen evil eye.

Semi-fantasy

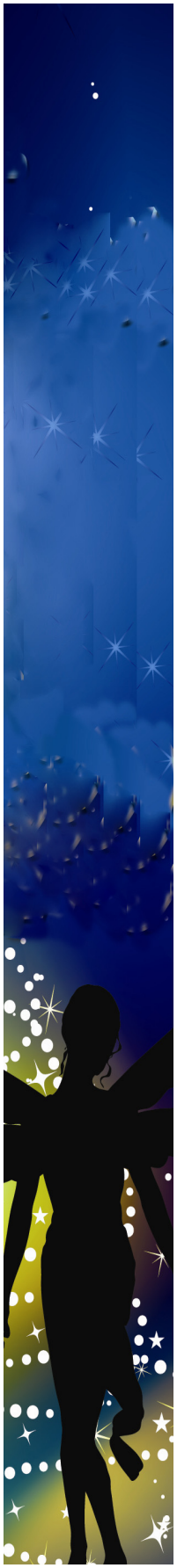
In these stories, there is no magical element but the author sets the story in an invented place, or a 'parallel universe' where history took a different form.

An example of this is **Joan Aiken's 'Wolves of Willoughby Chase'** (Cape), where the events are set in a nineteenth century England under the rule of King James III and where wolves have returned in force through a tunnel under the channel.

Good Versus Evil in Modern Settings

These stories tend to have an Arthurian flavour to them, such as **Susan Cooper's** much acclaimed **'The Dark is Rising'** series (Puffin) where the forces of evil try to wrest an ancient scroll from a group of children.

'Marco's Pendulum' by **Thom Madley** (Usborne) is set in Glastonbury. Marco and Rosa, are newcomers and through their own supernatural experiences, they are drawn into a dangerous struggle to protect Glastonbury from the dark purposes of an ancient evil force.



Ultra Modern Fantasies

This is the **Terry Pratchett** tongue-in-cheek style, where the whole thing is written for a laugh, but where important events take place to change the lives of ordinary people. It's just that the worlds they live in are different - very different.

In his **'Trucker'** series (Doubleday), they are tiny people who have to leave their homes when the department store they live in is scheduled for demolition. In **'The Carpet People'** (Doubleday) they are even smaller, living in a forest where the 'trees' are the pile of the carpet.

In his **'Disc World'** series, the world is a flat disc resting on the backs of elephants who stand on a giant turtle swimming through space. Magic is a fact of life, and the magicians at the Unseen University try to control it, not always successfully. The ancient city of Ankh-Morpork is an amalgam of all the sleazy cities you could ever think of, where the trade guilds include an Assassins Guild and a Thieves Guild who take severe offence at unauthorised stealing and are likely to do very nasty things to the offenders.

Again, if you haven't read any of them, do so now, **as they are the gold standard by which publishers judge this sub-genre.**

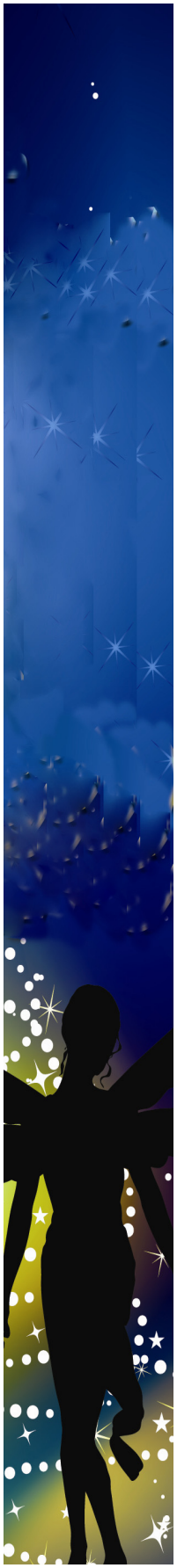
A growing sub-stratum has stories built on computer games and magical software. Terry Pratchett was one of the early proponents of this, with **'Only You Can Save Mankind'**, where Johnny tries to play a new game only to find the aliens have surrendered.

Another example of this type of book is **Lindsay Camp's 'Cabbages From Outer Space'** (Anderson Press) where a game sucks the computer and Emma into a fantasy world:

“It may not have occurred to you computers can behave in a magical fashion. You will know that they can do amazing things, like performing millions of calculations in the time it would take you to find a pencil and piece of paper to write down the sums, but you will not be aware that they operate under the strict rules of magic, especially as they relate to granting wishes.

The laws of magic say that if you are vague in your definition of what you want, the entity responsible for granting the wish may do so as it thinks fit.

So if you want a lot of money, what you have to say is "I want ten million pounds sterling, in current fifty pound notes, bundled in thousands and packed into two locked suitcases, one to be placed on my left and one on my right, both where I can easily pick them up, and with the keys in the left-hand pocket of the coat I am wearing; all of this to be done when I am standing in the foyer of my bank when the manager is expecting me." Because if you aren't this precise, but say something vague like "I want a lot of money," you are likely to find yourself immediately buried in a large pile of old farthings!



The same is true of computers. If you are not precise in your instructions (entered through the keyboard or via a mouse) then the computer is likely to do something you didn't expect. Computers are capable of giving logical and accurate answers, it's just that operators often are not sure about the way to phrase the question!"

Fantasy is a genre that spans all the age-bands.

For The Youngest Readers

Stories often start in the normal world and then return to a state of normality at the end, thus reassuring the readers (an important purpose of fiction) that security is just around the corner.

How wonderful it would be if you could really climb into a wardrobe and step out of the back into a magical world. What fun if Snow White was in New York, and had to get a job in a jazz-band with seven little men to escape from her wicked step-mother, as happens in **'Snow White in New York'** by **Fiona French** (Oxford University Press).

For The Middle Age-Band Readers

The stories begin to get more serious (unless Terry Pratchett is writing them) with the protagonist cast in the role of saviour of humanity from the forces of evil. Your main character in an epic fantasy could be a young squire, a misunderstood princess, an apprentice wizard, or a trainee healer.

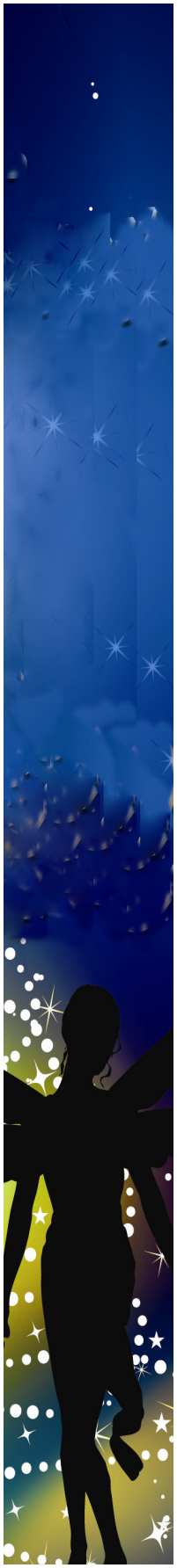
In a modern setting it could be an ordinary child who happens to have accidentally come into possession of a magical object. They are opposed by wicked sorcerers, evil invading warriors, marauding dragons, or a priesthood who want to eliminate magic from the world.

Here are some typical examples of epic fantasy stories:

In the Point Fantasy series (Scholastic), **'Healers Quest'**, by **Jessica Palmer** is about Zelia, a priestess on the renegades world. Half-human and half air-elemental, with sky-blue skin and strange tempers, she is chosen for an unusual and dangerous task.

'Firestorm', part of the Zagor Chronicles by **Ian Livingstone and Carl Sargent.** (Puffin) Across the lands of men, dwarves, elves and the proud centaurs of Barrabang, a swath of destruction cuts towards the heart of the beauty and glory of the magical land of Amarilla. An unknown power of a dark realm draws to itself dragons, un-dead horrors and other monstrous allies to destroy the glories of royal Castle Argent and attack the citadel of Sanctuary.

'The Warriors of Taan' by **Louise Lawrence** (Lion Tracks series - Collins). The people of Taan have known peace for centuries, until the coming of the Outworlders with their superior weapons and insatiable greed. As the warriors



prepare for a final hopeless assault on the invaders, a deeper plan is nearing fruition.

Tamora Pierce's quartet **'The Song of the Lioness'** (Red Fox), in which Alanna wishes to become a knight and her brother wishes to be a sorcerer. This is the story of their progress.

In a modern setting, the hero or heroine's parents or family may have some connection that sparks off the opening incident. Father is a historian, mother is an artist who goes into a trance and paints strange pictures. Uncle is an antiques dealer who acquires a strange box, or the family goes on holiday to grandmother's farm in the Welsh hills or some other remote and magical place.

For example, in **'Star Lord'** by **Louise Lawrence** (Bodley Head), a mysterious plane crashes in the Welsh hills, and a strange boy is found in the farm outbuildings. He says he is from Eridani Epsilon, 11 light-years away, and was on an observation flight, but he's been shot, and the Army are looking for him.

In **'Voyage to Valhalla'** by **Robert Swindells** (Knight), Davy discovers a human skeleton in a wood, and is then plagued by hauntings and hallucinations. His attempt to help a cursed Viking chief on his way to Valhalla leads him and his friends into danger.

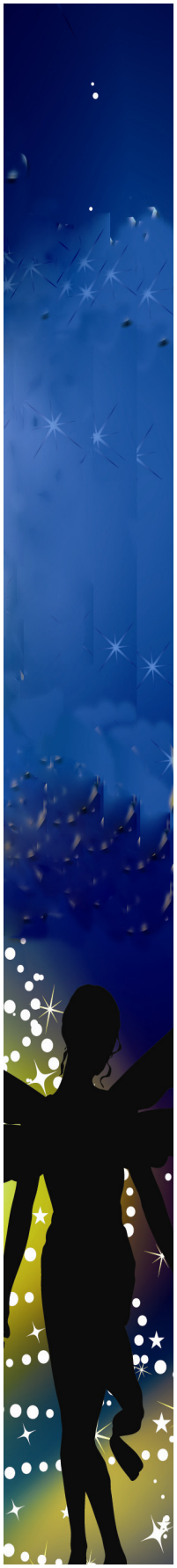
Dungeons and Dragons

An interesting off-shoot is the range of fighting games known generically as Dungeons and Dragons. Originally (and still) a board game where you throw dice to find out your persona and to give you your moves and powers, it has grown into popular computer games and several series of game-books.

A typical example of these is the **'Lone Wolf'** series by **Joe Denver** (Red Fox). Each book contains several pages of notes, for the readers to list their Grand Master disciplines (e.g. animal mastery) contents of the backpack (e.g. potion of larkspur, two meals). There is a Combat Record, with Endurance Points, lists of special items carried (e.g. amulet) weapons list (e.g. bow, broadsword).

They typically start thus - 'The story so far: you are Grand Master Lone Wolf, the sole survivor of a massacre that wiped out the First Order of the Kai - the warrior elite of Sommerlund.' They give your history, the rules of the game, lists and pictures of equipment, combat rules, etc.

Starting at paragraph 1, with a basic scenario, at the end of each section they tell you which numbered paragraph to go to next, depending on which skills, equipment etc. you possess. Each paragraph takes you further through the game, describing 'your' actions. To give you an idea of the popularity of these books, Joe Denver's publishers say that his world-wide sales are **more than seven million copies.**



There is no defined line between books for the middle age band and teenagers. The only real differences are the ages of the characters (and thus their thought processes and behaviour) and the increased sophistication of the plots and the techniques of story-telling.

Indeed, the only real difference between fantasy and adult fantasy is that sex can (but rarely does) appear in adult books. Epic fantasy is, by its very nature, **a genre of writing that requires a certain innocence on the part of the reader.**

This is part of the desire for moral order. **Few people believe in angels and devils any more, but most still carry a conviction that good and evil are an objective reality.** Fantasy stories just take a step further from the child's conviction that things should be fair, and that good should triumph over evil.

The Battle Between Good and Evil

They also operate on the premise that if there is an ongoing battle between good and evil, then those who fight for good should be prepared to make sacrifices.

So deciding you want to be a wizard or healer usually means giving up normal life and family to undergo a long and dangerous training. This training, and the 'sorcerer's apprentice' like errors which can occur often serve as the main story-line.

The need to understand and adhere to the many accepted conventions means that epic fantasy is not the easiest type of story to write. If you have a taste for it, then try it, but be sure to choose a publisher that specialises in it. Many do not, and will not, although they all wish they had Terry Pratchett on their list. Maybe you can create a fantastic world as successful as his.

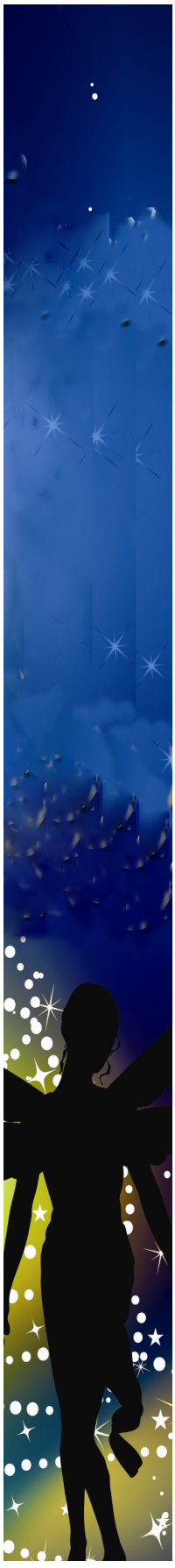
Also, you should be aware that 'Lord of the Rings' set a standard that is a very tough act to follow. There have been many imitators, but they remain just that - imitators. To be a successful science fantasy writer, you must tread the narrow path between originality and convention. Few publishers will accept yet another 'Zwanthon from the plains of Zackaar with his mighty sword, Stormquest' type of story. It has to be new, original and different but without throwing out all the long established conventions of this genre.

Science Fiction

What is the difference between science fiction and science fantasy? Well, the distinctions are blurred, but readers certainly know the difference.

Science fantasy stories contain:

- Magical powers.
- Mythical creatures (e.g. dragons).
- Wizards.



- Goblins, elves, orks, trolls, etc.
- Warriors.

Science fiction rarely, if ever, has any of these elements.

The main theme in science fiction is:

- The discovery, colonisation and subsequent socialisation of distant planets in a 'real' (i.e. not fantastic or mythical) believable universe.

Many readers of science fiction will consider this far too strict a definition and will gleefully produce stories by their favourite authors which exceed the boundaries of this description. However, it is a fair working definition.

Also, science fiction started out (as its name implies) with tales of *science* - mainly futuristic, and this is still an all pervading theme.

To compare science fantasy with science fiction is to compare:

- Wizards with warp drives.
- Magic with science and technology.
- Goblins with galaxies.
- Swords with lightsabres.
- Steeds with starships.

Most science fiction stories fall into two types:

- Those where the **technology and machinery** are of prime importance (the original *science* fiction).
- Those where the **gadgetry provides a mere backdrop to the social mores** of the time and place, or to **the adventure taking place**.

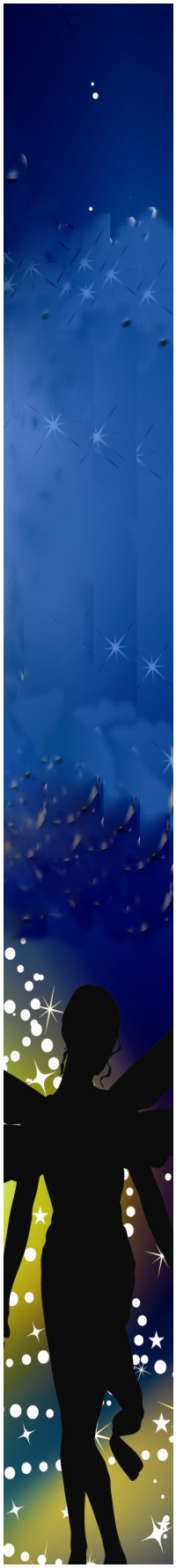
Two fairly typical science fiction adventure stories are:

'World of the Stiks' by **Douglas Hill** (Bantam) in which 13 year old Jonmac is part of the group who set up base on the distant planet of Bregele II, home to the Stiks, tall spindly humanoids whose peaceful nature and primitive ways make them easy prey for a group of ruthless criminals.

'Killer Planet' by **Bob Shaw** (Gollancz). Verdia - the most mysterious, dangerous, deadly planet man has ever discovered: a mist shrouded world from which no-one has ever returned. Jan Hazard and his friend Petra determine to find Jan's elder brother who is one of the planet's victims.

Social Organisation

Many science fiction plots have some unusual form of **social organisation** as their basic idea, and the story revolves round how the characters adjust to living with, or fighting against, the central organisation.



The latter idea of fighting against organisation appeals to the anarchist that lurks in most children and all teenagers. And your characters can put themselves into the riskiest situations, winning through by dint of resourcefulness.

Remembering that there are only a few tens of plot ideas **in total**, then you can see that **all** science fiction consists of writing these thirty (or so) plots in an 'alien world' setting. Similarly, **all** science fantasy consists of writing these thirty (or so) plots in a fantasy setting.

Settings for science fiction stories can be:

- Future Earth.
- Alien worlds (past, present or future).
- Space habitats.
- Space ships.

Space ships are often tramp ships, plying their trade round the galaxy. It is usually the main character's parents who are the astronauts, but in some stories it can be a child or teenagers, selected for the fast reactions of youth.

In **Orson Scott Card's 'Ender's Game'**, the hero is a boy who is selected for training as a space fighter pilot. Much of the training consists of games with flight simulators, and it is only after the finish of what he thought was his graduation 'game' that Ender learns it was for real and he has defeated an invading alien fleet.

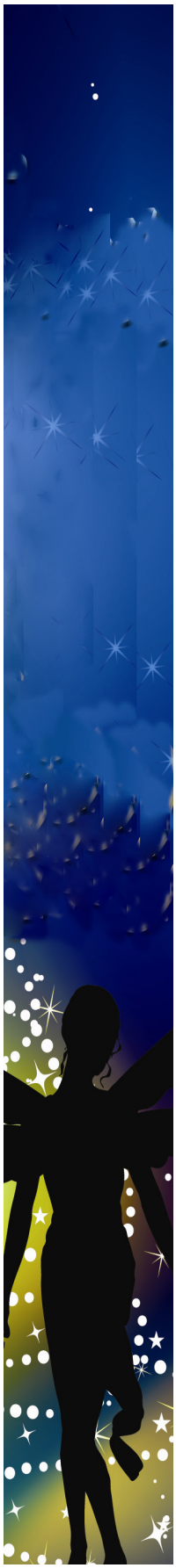
Time Travel

There are also time travel stories and tales of parallel universes, black holes, 'wormholes' in space, faster than light travel and much else besides.

They can be comic (such as the brilliant 'Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy' by **Douglas Adams**), or deadly serious, often involving the survival of the planet Earth.

The ecological movement and concern over pollution has spawned many stories in the 'post-holocaust' form. These used to feature a future Earth where nuclear war has devastated the planet, but now it is more likely to be an ecological disaster such as global warming or a new ice age. Small bands of survivors try to rebuild civilisation, or create a new civilisation that has learned its lesson.

These stories are often close to a fantasy overlap, as the characters follow a quest through difficult terrain and enemy resistance in their attempts to find and recover the person or the machinery essential to mankind's survival.



Alien Worlds and Creatures

Alien worlds are extremely popular with most children, as are alien creatures, and it is when you are creating these that you have to be careful that your world and its creatures will work**. A common error is to invent a splendid predator to terrify your characters, but to omit to provide it with natural prey.**

Big animals have big appetites. Whether it is a lone hunter like the tiger, or a social hunter like lions, which prey on large herds, they need a handy supply of food. Most land prey animals are herbivores and that means you need to supply large amounts of vegetation to feed the herbivores that feed the predators. So don't put giant hunters in desert conditions, whether the desert is dry and hot or cold and icy. By the way, this is why the Loch Ness monster almost certainly does not exist. Loch Ness is a cold, dark, almost lifeless lake – so what would it eat? There must be more than one of them too otherwise how would they breed?

There is a trap for the unwary that lurks in the process of building an alien world. Rather like the situation where people insist on showing their holiday photographs to an audience who soon become bored, **it is easy to become so engrossed in your new world that you risk boring your readers.**

Like the process of researching, you need to build your worlds in detail and with care, **but you don't have to show it all to the reader.**

Science Fiction Research

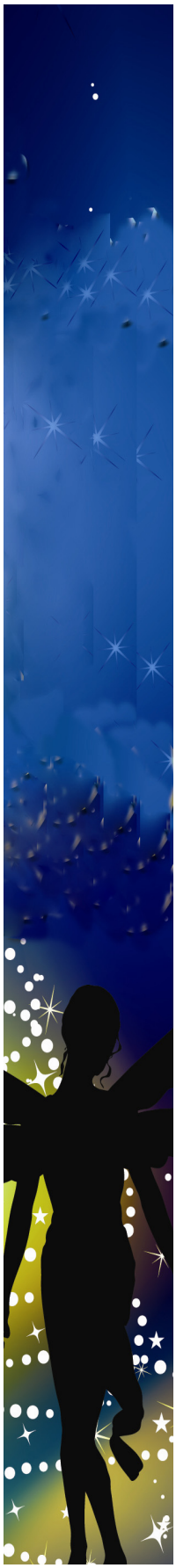
If you lack a scientific background, but want to create worlds that really would work, it is well worth subscribing to a good science fiction magazine like Analog or New Destinies. These carry a great deal of fiction, but also articles where possibilities in the formation of worlds and also the development of space-craft are discussed at length.

You should also steep yourself in this genre. Countless thousands of 'Sci-Fi' books have been written, and there is not an idea that hasn't been done to death. Don't worry, ***your*** **idea merely has to be an interesting and subtle twist on a previous idea - or told from an unusual perspective.**

Unless your plot hinges on difficulties with space-suits, it is sensible to create worlds that are sufficiently like Earth in atmosphere and gravity to allow humans to move around in them with ease. Why do you think this happened so often on Doctor Who, and Star Trek! The action would be seriously curtailed if all the main characters had to live in environmental suits.

Religion and Morals in Other Worlds

Approximately the same rule applies to the creation of alien societies. The development of religion all over the world makes it reasonable to assume that aliens would have some form of belief to account for the seasons and the



vagaries of existence.

It is also reasonable to assume the same sort of personal mores that we have, such as the importance of the family and the desirability of acquiring enough territory to ensure a steady food supply.

You just need to be a little careful with creatures that are neither mammals nor humanoid. For instance, ant-like creatures might sacrifice the individual for the good of the nest; and worker bees do specific jobs at different stages of their lives.

Another Product from Your Notes

If you are successful in creating a world and characters that prove popular with your readers, they will want to read more about them. At this stage you may find you have to give a lot more thought to the evolution of your world and the social history of its occupants. Keep all your notes. You may want to add a glossary or section in your books relating to this history, or your publishers may even feel there is a market for a separate book.

Even without this possibility, unless you have some idea of the social history, you will find it difficult to explain why the problems your characters are facing are so important. This can be difficult without have to go off on an expository tangent.

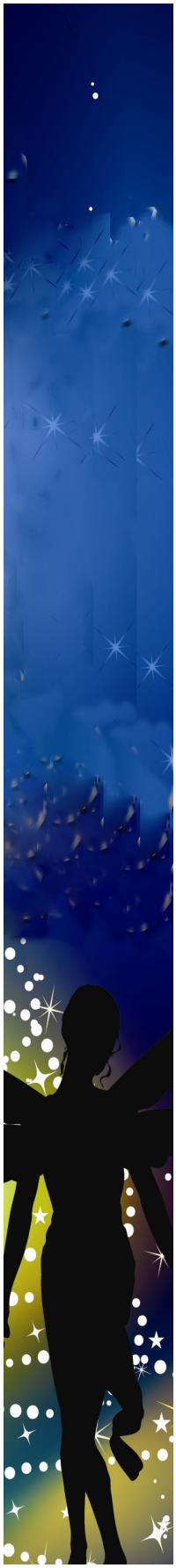
One of the accepted devices for providing necessary snippets of history, or local law, is to provide extracts from local 'reference books' at the beginning of chapters.

Science fiction fans are already familiar with quotes from Encyclopaedia Galactica; or that new addition to the famous 'Jane's World' series of books on ships and aircraft 'Jane's Fighting Space-ships of the Galaxy'.

You could have great fun extrapolating other series to give authority to your background information. How about 'The Guinness Book of Galactic Records'; 'The Oxford Vogon Dictionary'; or for younger readers, 'The Observers Book of Robots'? Or of course you can invent your own titles appropriate to your plots.

Whether you need to get involved in detailed explanations of machinery will depend on your own inclination. There is no more need to do it than there is to explain how aeroplanes or motor-cars work when you are writing stories set in the modern day.

If you are not technically minded, you are unlikely to create plots that turn on the technical details of hardware, and it is the plot that matters. Most people manage to make modern machinery work perfectly well without knowing how it works, (DVD recorders and anyone over the age of ten excepted, of course!).



You know how to operate a light-switch, but probably don't know or care how the power-station works, and it will be just the same in the future. So don't make your average John Doe character launch into a technical lecture about how the anti-grav lift works. The chances are that he probably won't have a clue. In fact it would be extremely believable to make him *say* that he hasn't a clue!

Device Names

Much the same goes for naming devices. Many people now refer to their television remote control as the 'zapper' and no doubt they will continue to find similar words to describe the hi-tech implements in the future. 'Widget', 'gizmo' and 'thingamajig' are terms that have been around for a long time, and there is no reason why your characters should not continue to use them.

If you have an eye for humour (like Douglas Adams), then it would be very funny to use these things throughout your story:

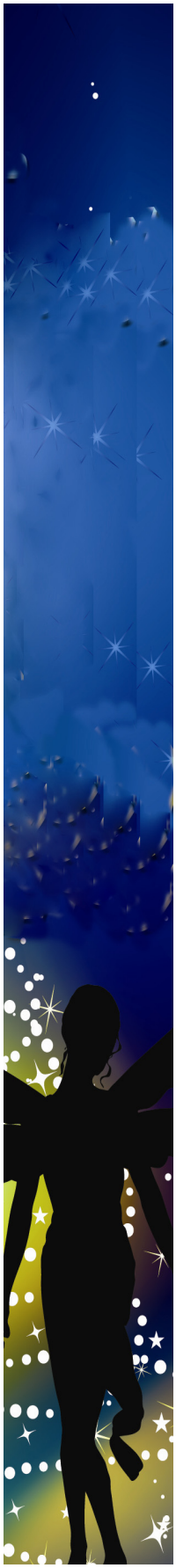
"My God! What do you call that miraculous device with which you have healed my burn?"
"Umm... it's called a thingamajig, I believe."

You don't have to explain how things work, or give them technical names, all you have to do is think what would be useful. It is pretty well accepted in science fiction that future cities will be mega-storied (often underground) and vast, and that people will get around on moving pavements and gravity lifts; that private vehicles will be controlled by a central computer; and that other computers will control home environments.

All of these ideas come from merely extrapolating current trends.
There is an unwritten understanding that an 'invention' described in a published book becomes common property, so **you are free to mention such devices as long as you don't copy the actual descriptions.** It is polite to give things a slightly different name. For instance, you might have read of a moving pavement called a 'pedwalk', so you call yours the 'pedway'.

Otherwise, as far as naming things is concerned, you only have to look around you to realise that **we name most things for their function**. In your kitchen you will have a food-processor or a coffee-maker; outside you will have a lawn-mower or a wheel-barrow; and as you go about your daily life you will see a fire-engine, a post-box, or a lamp-post. Therefore it is unlikely that a tea making machine will be called a Vraznowizon, in the future.

You could even go retro. If future torches are powered not by batteries but by a canister of gas, why not call them gas lights? If people have home deliveries of a white liquid fuel for their home generators, the person delivering it could easily be called the milkman – and so on. The point is, it's unlikely that future societies will use all new futuristic words. They are far more likely to draw heavily on the past. New words are, in fact, rarely introduced into the



language. Even ‘Internet’ is not a word like ‘Zagrohypon’. It just consists of two existing rods, inter and net. Our mobile phones are not called Xytrapods – they’re called mobile phones!

Already you can buy a wrist-watch with a built-in calculator and at the rate things are going, it won't be long before you can have a wrist computer. It's only the need for a keyboard big enough for human fingers that is preventing it, and they're working on voice commands right now. Add a radio facility, like you have in mobile telephones, and you have a device which might be called an arm-talker (rather than a gyradensicon). Go a little bit further, with a snazzy paint-job and a few jewels and you've got the perfect fashion accessory.

Let your imagination run free and have fun. If you enjoy what you create, your readers will too. Just remember that those **readers need to be able to identify with your main characters, whether those characters are human or something else.**

Remember also that, as **humans** we are only *really* concerned with what happens to other humans. Yes, it might be terrible for the Dralgons from Sigma III that the Thworks from Gamma IV are trying to destroy them with the new, horrific Infrabomb, but really, do we care? No. What’s one Dralgon more or less, I say! Let ‘em all burn…

We only care about our human heroes and heroines. We care if *they* get caught in the blast, but twenty billion Thworks and ten billion Dralgons? They probably deserved it anyway. Any race with three antennae and eyeballs in their stomachs can't be much good... death’s too good for them.

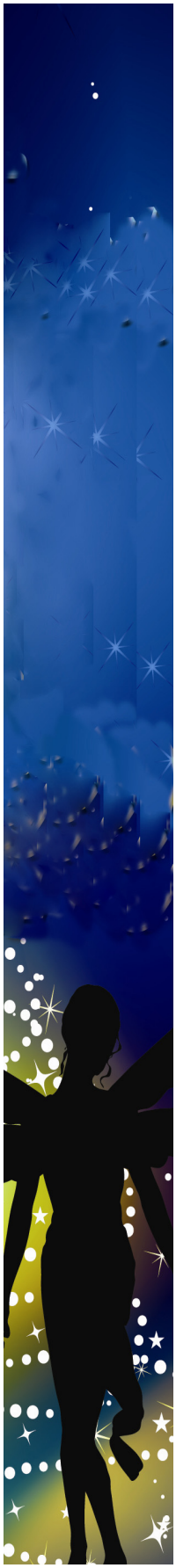
For this reason, science fiction stories that deal *solely* with alien worlds are rarely successful. Those that work usually have their main 'alien' characters as recognisable humans in alien skins. This makes such stories little different from Watership Down which featured ‘rabbits’ who were little more than humans in rabbit skins.

Revision

The biggest misconception held by beginner writers is that you come to the end of writing your story, pull the last piece of paper from the machine, stub out your last Gauloise, parcel up your manuscript, and send it off to the publishers. You can do that, of course, but it is **a sure way to invite a rejection slip.**

What professionals do, and what you must do, is to come to the end and then say to yourself, "I've finished the first draft". Then, after a break, you start the revision process, and continue revising until you polish your work to the highest degree you can achieve.

You do need that break, to distance yourself from what you have done. It is the



strangest feeling to finish a book, especially if you have been working on it for many months. You feel a combination of relief that it is over, a feeling of guilt because you aren't working on it, and an emptiness because you don't have it to do any more. You need to wait until all this has died down (at least a fortnight and ideally more) to distance yourself before you look at the manuscript again.

Renewed Viewing

You must be able to look at it with a really critical eye, and only distance will allow you to do this properly. You will find it easier to take the proper critical attitude if you use the break to work on something else.

All professional writers expect to revise, and this makes the act of creation easier. What matters is that the story should flow out of your head and onto the paper without any more hesitation than is occasioned by the need to deal with the rest of your daily life.

If you keep stopping the flow to rewrite sections and polish little bits, you are inviting the whole thing to slow to a halt and lock up in the dreaded writer's block. It is far better to let it flow to the end, then go back and sort out anything that isn't perfect (and there will be plenty).

First Drafts

Some professional writers even make a habit of deliberately skating over certain aspects in the first draft. They will skate over describing the settings; do no more than rough out the dialogue; even leave decisions over names until later, just referring to them as 'hero' or 'mother'. You may find this a little extreme, but if it works for you, there is no reason why you shouldn't do it.

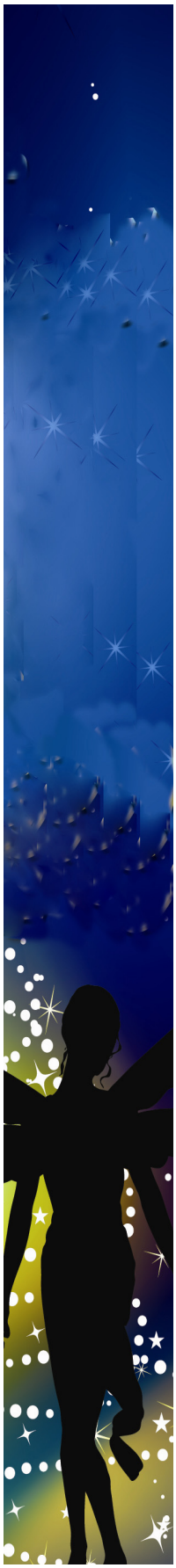
The best way to tackle revision is the way a good editor tackles her job. You cannot do the whole thing in one 'pass', so you need to decide how to split up the many things you have to look for, and do each task or block of tasks on one of several read-throughs.

What follows is my suggestion on how you tackle the job, but you may prefer to alter the order of some of the later sections to suit yourself.

You will need a pencil in your hand while you read your work, and you should approach the task with the conviction and certain knowledge that you are going to have to retype the whole manuscript, otherwise you may be reluctant to make all the necessary alterations. Do not concern yourself with spelling or typing errors in the early stages.

Stage One of Revision

Start by reading the whole thing straight through. Don't do any more than make a mark in the margin if any passages strike you as jarring. What you need to do in this first read through is pretend that you have never seen the



story before and that you are reading it as a stranger.

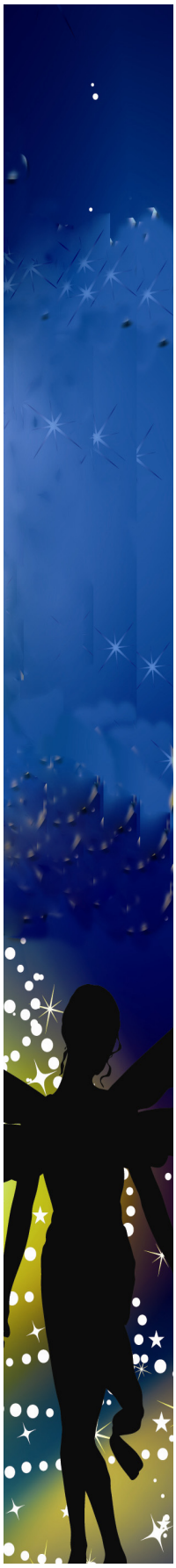
When you have finished, make notes on anything of a general nature that struck you.

Stage Two

Start asking yourself some specific questions. These should come under the two general headings of **construction and technique**. You may like to create your own check list that you will use for revising all your books.

Consider the pace of your story:

- Does it build to a satisfactory crescendo though a series of 'waves'?
- Did it start in a way that dragged you in and made you want to know what happened?
- Did you continue to want to know what happened all the way through?
- Were you satisfied with the ending, or was it a 'so what?' anti-climax?
- Did the ending come too soon, in a way that might make the readers think you'd got bored with it and decided to finish it?
- Is there plenty of conflict? Would another character help with this?
- Is the plot sensible all the way through the story or a bit weak in places?
- Are there any bits where you've waffled because you didn't know what to do? For example, unnecessary descriptions of the scene at breakfast or in the bus to school?
- Are there any places where you've done a 'one mighty bound' or 'Deus Ex Machina'?
- Are there any bits where you've assumed that your readers have special knowledge? If so, how can you insert the necessary information without making it obvious?
- Have any of the characters produced some skill or implement that you should have mentioned earlier on?
- Have you done the opposite and slotted in big expository passages where the characters explain things to each other, or worse, where your voice as writer has intruded with a mini-lecture? Have you allowed your pet prejudices to intrude in evangelical passages that aren't relevant to the plot?
- Does your research show? It shouldn't. Have you stuffed in all those interesting facts because you felt it was a pity to waste them after all the work you did to collect them? Are they all strictly relevant?
- On the other hand, have you checked everything, so there are no glaring errors that will show you up?



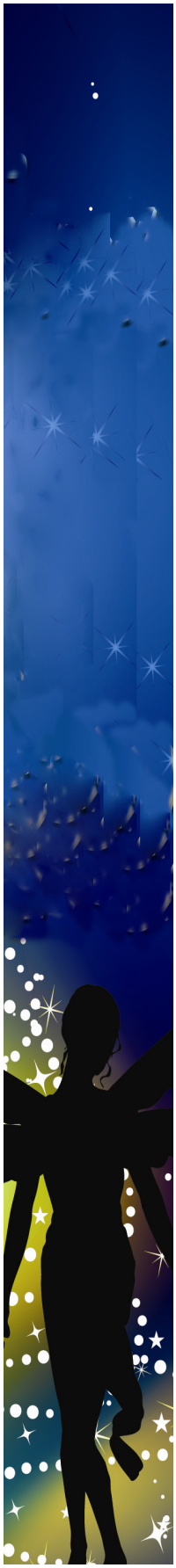
- Are the transitions smooth where you have moved through time or space between one scene and the next? Have you made the transition with a few words such as 'the next day' or 'the journey to Grandma's house was tiring'; or have you been lazy and just left an extra line space between paragraphs?
- Does your time-scale work? No eight day weeks or twenty week school terms? Is it reasonable to fit the action into weekends or after school?

By the time you've reached this stage you may have realised that there is much superfluous material that you should cut out, but are reluctant to do it because it will leave your wordage short. Banish that thought, because it is putting the cart before the horse.

Follow the simple rule: **if in doubt, cut it out.** Professionals do not hesitate. Anyway, you will inevitably find that you will need to expand other areas, and so the wordage will soon come back up again.

Consider your characters:

- Are they real, rounded people or cardboard cut-outs?
- Are they a reasonable balance of good and bad points?
- Do all the characters act in character?
- Are the names you have chosen appropriate, and sufficiently different to avoid confusion?
- Are any of the characters stereotypes, or cast in moulds that a politically correct editor will object to?
- Are all the characters absolutely necessary, or can you relegate some of them to 'bit-player' roles?
- Is your main character one the readers will be able to identify with, or want to identify with?
- Has your main character learnt something about him/herself by the end, and is it appropriate to the book's theme?
- Is your main character's problem appropriate to his/her age and background?
- Does the dialogue move the action forward, or bog down into several unnecessary exchanges that you could cut to a simple 'she asked him to start the dish-washer'?
- Does each character have his/her own voice, or do they all speak the same way? Is their style of speech appropriate to who and what they are, or is it just you talking all the time?



Consider settings and style:

- Are your descriptions of settings and people strong enough without being too long?
- Have you written them in terms that will mean something to your young readers?
- Have you resorted to clichés, or have you invented your own fresh images?
- Have you used all the senses, or only those related to your own preferred input method?
- Are there any passages that you are particularly proud of, where you feel your writing was especially fine? Are you really sure they are that good or are you just showing off?
- If they are excellent, why do they stand out and what can you do to bring the rest of it up to the same standard?

Second Draft

When you have considered all these points, in as many readings as you feel necessary, you may prefer to write your second draft before you get down to the finer points of word editing.

Word Editing

Start this task by flipping though each page very quickly to look at **the paragraph lengths:**

- Are they appropriate to the age of the target reader?
- Do they vary in length, or look like identical blocks of text on the page?
- Are they broken up with plenty of dialogue?

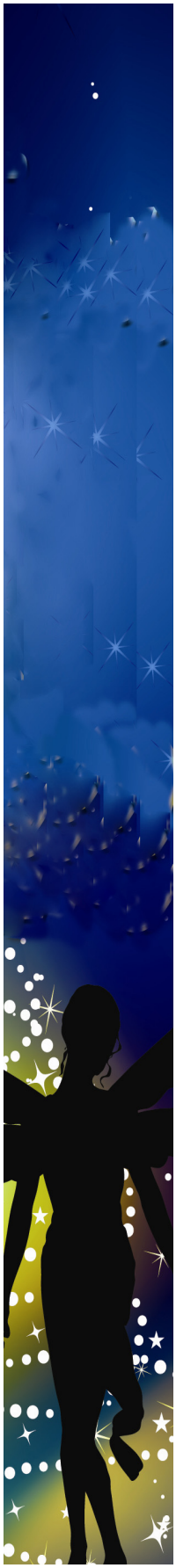
What about sentence length? They should be appropriate to the age of the reader. Have you done a Fog Index test?

Have you fallen into the trap of the 'multi-it' sentence? Read this example quickly:

'One bullock broke away from the herd and headed for the woods. The rider chased it, pushing his horse to its fastest speed. He managed to block it as it reached the first trees, turning his horse on his hind legs and cracking his whip in its face until it turned.' Which 'it' is which? Which 'his' is which?

Have your descriptions slipped into the impossible? For example:

'He had a big sister who wore red shoes, a Siamese cat and a collection of marbles.'



Do all the component parts of all your characters remain attached to them, or do they become separated? **Eyes are particularly prone to this strange behaviour, for example:**

'She cast her eyes out of the window' or ' his eyes jumped back and forth across the table'.

Have any superfluous words crept in? Have you for example:

- Mentioned that the coal is black or the grass green?
- Is the wind 'freezing cold'?
- Is your hero's father a tall 6'6"?

Do those extra words add anything, or should you delete them?

Have you mixed any metaphors? For example:

- Does anyone suggest they should put their shoulder to the wheel and hope for a fair wind?

Have you used adverbs and adjectives to qualify pedestrian verbs, when a moment's thought or a look in the thesaurus would have given you a more precise verb? In other words, did you write:

"He quickly ran down the street", when "He *raced* down the street" might have been better?

Have you done the same thing with adjectives and nouns?

Did you write "The huge car" when "The limousine" might have worked in that context?

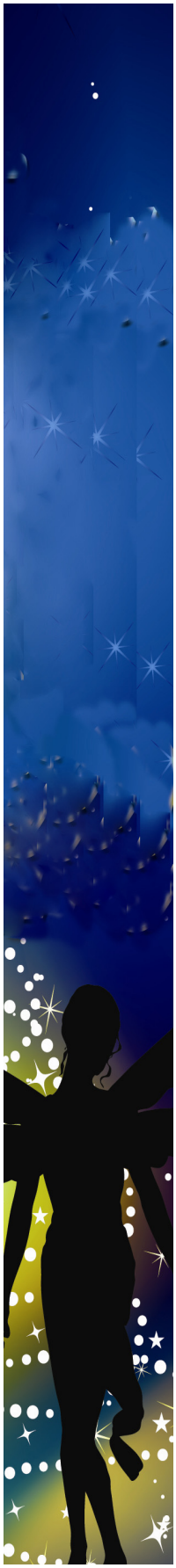
Are your words the right length for the pace of the action, or the feelings you want to create in your descriptions? Remember:

- Short, sharp, crisp words are best for fast-paced action.
- Lingering, multi-syllable words are best for romantic, dreamy, or thoughtful scenes.

The Final Proof Read

Finally, as the very last task, when you have checked and corrected everything else and are about to type the final version, are there any **spelling or punctuation errors?**

All of this may read like a daunting task. It may not be, and probably won't be. You will find some of the questions apply to you, in your first few books at least, but it is unlikely that all of them will.



The more you write, the fewer 'beginner's traps' you will fall into, **and the shorter this revision process will become.** But you should never skimp it, or think it doesn't apply to you. It is this process of ruthless pruning and loving polishing that produces writing that reads smoothly. **It is the one process that will do most for your chances of being published.**

And with computers, this process is extremely easy! Remember, you are trying to become a **professional** writer. This is someone who writes and expects to get paid for it. With this in mind, is it reasonable that your writing should be anything less than your claims to be professional?

Using Passive Language

This is one of the many manifestations of the common mistake of **telling,** rather than **showing** what happened. In fiction it often appears as a passive statement in the pluperfect, **for example:**

“By the time night fell, all the logs **had been** neatly stacked in the shed.' The offending words are 'had been', because they make it appear that some unknown and mysterious outside agency had done the stacking. It would be far better if that sentence reads “By the time night fell, Matthew had stacked all the logs neatly in the shed.”

Things don't just happen. Someone, or something, makes them happen. If you arrive on a scene, and find things are different, you would say "Who did that?” not "What has happened here?" The answer to the first question will be active: "Matthew did it."; while the answer to the second question would be the passive "The logs have been stacked."

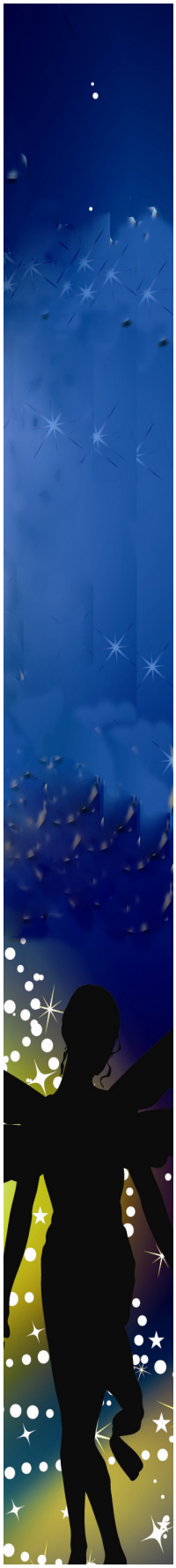
Children might tolerate passive verbs in fiction if the basic story is interesting, but you will quickly put them off non-fiction if you do not write in a way that holds their interest. **Compare these two statements:**

"During the long reign of King Rene IX, many new laws were passed. Several of these eased the tax burden of the peasants."

"During his long reign, King Rene IX passed many laws to reduce the tax burden on the peasants."

The first version is at best boring and at worst pompous. The second version is much more interesting, because it tells of the actions of the king and the effect they had. It makes him appear as a caring monarch who did something for his subjects, not just someone who happened to be on the throne while events happened round him.

And that is the crux of the matter. **Things happen because something or someone does something, not out of thin air.** These passive verb forms are difficult to spot.



In fact, the sentence above is an example of the 'passive voice'! It might be better to write:

'You will have difficulty in spotting sentences written in the passive voice'.

Often you will struggle to think of a way to re-write the sentence. **For example, consider this:**

'The logs had been covered by a thin layer of snow during the night.'

Well, no person had sneaked in during the night and sprinkled snow on the logs, and so you cannot really write; 'John had sprinkled the logs with a thin layer of snow ...'.

At first, it seems hard to re-write this sentence and avoid the passive voice, but how about:

'Winter had covered the logs with a thin layer of snow...'

You slip into the passive voice whenever you make the **object** of a sentence into the **subject** of a sentence.

For example, in the sentence 'Mary repaired her bike', Mary is the subject and 'the bike' is the object ('repaired' is, of course, the verb). If we make 'the bike' the subject, then we get, 'The bike **was repaired** by Mary', which is an example of the passive voice, even though we identify the repairer.

The passive voice always sounds like a textbook, or unduly authoritarian. The writer seeks to distance himself from the writing, saying in effect 'This is not really me speaking, I've been told to write this, I'm not to blame'.

In its extreme, we end up with:

“It is important that walkers refrain from perpetrating perambulations which would result in the flattening of lawn.”

Instead of the more elegant:

“Please do not walk on the lawn.”

Well, that’s all for now.

Enjoy your writing and I’ll see you next month with more information on how to become a millionaire children’s author.

Scott Thornton