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Chapter

4 - Genre and speculative fiction pp. 37-51

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Genre and speculative fiction

The pleasures and possibilities of genre

This chapter is all about writing genre fiction. In that statement lies our first problem: genres are often defined by what is common, reused or similar; creative writing is often defined as the pursuit of originality, especially when being conceived, theorised and taught in tertiary institutions. Generic expectations are often viewed as ‘a constraint on textual energy’¹ and this perspective can act as a disincentive to write in genres. I argue here for a recognition of the pleasures and possibilities of genre and offer you some ways to approach the creation and composition of texts within one of the most widely read genres: speculative fiction.

When creative writers choose to write genre fiction – fantasy, historical, crime and so on – they have to grapple with unique complexities regarding how their work is positioned in a literary community that still delineates between writing for art’s sake and writing for a market. The term ‘genre fiction’ is often used interchangeably with ‘popular fiction’. The reason the two terms are considered synonymous is because the marketplace is presumed to be a significant influence over both popularity (in the form of sales) and genre (in the form of marketing categories). Pierre Bourdieu writes of two principles that position literature in the field of cultural production: the ‘heteronomous’, which is concerned with ‘the economic field’ and measured ‘by indices such as book sales’; and the ‘autonomous’, which is concerned with ‘artistic prestige’ and freedom from ‘the laws of the market’.² Popular and genre fiction are aligned with the heteronomous principle and therefore sectioned off from, even viewed as antagonistic to, the autonomous principle: it cannot be ‘Literature’ because art and the marketplace are held to be mutually exclusive. This division between autonomous and heteronomous texts is easily problematised. Feted writers such as Annie Proulx or Ian McEwan are also bestsellers; and the occasional genre novel garners critical acclaim (e.g. vampire novels such as John Ajvide Lindqvist’s *Let the Right One In* and Justin Cronin’s *The Passage*)

or wins a big literary award (e.g. Philip Pullman's fantasy novel *The Amber Spyglass* won the Whitbread Prize in 2002 in the UK and Peter Temple's crime novel *Truth* won the Miles Franklin in 2010 in Australia).

Criticism of genre fiction usually revolves around taxonomy: identifying elements that are commonly used and suggesting that they are deployed cynically to fulfil the requirements of genre, rather than to achieve new self-expression: not 'new richness' but 'the exact same thing'.³ Perhaps the genre that attracts the most scorn in this regard is romance fiction. Common wisdom holds that there is a 'formula' for romance fiction, which can be obtained from Harlequin Mills & Boon. This 'formula' is held as evidence that there is no art to romance fiction's composition. However, the 'author guidelines' provided by Harlequin Mills & Boon could be read as evidence against this perspective. There are eighteen varieties of romance published by HM&B (which, it should be noted, is only one publisher in the vast field of romance fiction) and they differ widely. The Desire imprint, for example, calls for the stereotypical 'alpha male with a sense of arrogance and entitlement', while the Superromance imprint is 'open to innovation' and wants authors to 'break free of stereotypes, clichés and worn plot devices'. The Blaze imprint encourages authors to 'push the boundaries in terms of [sexual] explicitness', while the Steeple Hill imprint only accepts 'euphemisms for the more intimate body parts'. The Sweet imprint is 'highly focussed on the relationship', while the Luna imprint features romance only as 'subplots that enhance the main story but don't become the focus of the novel'. The suggested upper length of the texts ranges from 50,000 words to 150,000 words. The website is keen to point out that there is 'no formula' and that the guidelines cannot be 'a substitute for extensive reading' across the many imprints, foregrounding a point I will make below about reading as a part of the process of genre formation.⁴ Yes, these guidelines are prescriptive but, importantly, there are eighteen different prescriptions. While it would seem to be an easy task to decide what generic elements belong in a romance novel – two people meeting and falling in love – these elements are mobilised via a variety of approaches. In fact, all we can say with certainty about romance fiction is that it contains romance; just as all we can say with certainty about crime fiction is that it contains crime; historical fiction is about history and so on through other genres (including: literary fiction is marked by its literariness). This core element may be the very thing that attracts writers and readers in the first place: it is one of the chief pleasures. But, beyond the core of a genre, the rest of the elements are under constant negotiation and renegotiation.

Genre emerges, Jason Mittell writes, 'out of specific cultural relations, rather than abstract textual ideals'. Because those cultural relations are specific, that means that genres are 'wide-ranging, ever-changing cluster[s]

of discourses', not 'uniform transhistorical essence[s]'.⁵ These cultural relations are the relations between authors and readers, as I have already suggested, but also institutions. In most cases readers will have developed 'literary competence' in their favourite genres, indicating that texts 'have structure and meaning because [they] are read in a particular way'.⁶ The meaning of a genre is not inherent to specific texts, then, rather it is 'derived from a system of conventions which the reader has assimilated'.⁷ This competence means that readers come to a text in any genre with a 'horizon of expectations', some of which will be met and some of which will remain unmet or will even be changed by the individual text.⁸ Those expectations are formed in the public sphere and therefore are not free of institutional influence; rather genres are processes that involve the interactions of authors *and* readers *and* institutions in more or less equal measure. The HM&B guidelines are right: in such a shifting and contingent system, there can be 'no formula'. Genre texts always have the potential to be 'transformative instantiations' of a particular genre,⁹ rather than being the result of 'words poured into a mould'.¹⁰ That is, generic conventions are 'always *in* play rather than simply being *replayed*'.¹¹ Between these two principles – the pleasure of the genre as it stands (replay) and the possibilities of doing something fresh or unexpected with the genre (in play) – there are many potentially rewarding opportunities for creative writers.

What is speculative fiction?

Speculative fiction, one might argue, provides almost infinite scope for putting elements in play because it deals openly with that which is fantastic and unfamiliar. Speculative fiction, as its name suggests, speculates in a fictional way on things that are not true. I am sometimes told that all fiction speculates and that is correct. But speculative fiction is distinguished by the use of the fantastic mode. Ruth Rendell creates a not-true person in Inspector Wexford and then goes on to speculate about how he may act in certain situations. But in these situations he never reaches for a sonic screwdriver, does battle with a dragon, nor banishes ghosts from a haunted hotel: Ruth Rendell's crime fiction uses the mode of realism. Futuristic technology, magical beasts and spirits of the dead are generally held to be not of the real world, but of the fantastic imagination (in the case of technology, of course, what is true is constantly changing; and many people believe in spirits, though dragons, unfortunately, do not really get a look-in).

Speculative fiction is usually broken down into three distinct subgenres: fantasy fiction, science fiction and horror, though this breakdown is inadequate to anyone familiar with the genre. Hybrids abound (my own work has

mixed fantasy and horror); short fiction may use different forms (high fantasy, for instance, is very rare in short fiction); subgenres proliferate (within science fiction we find cyberpunk, steampunk, space opera, alternative history and others); new subgenres form, grow popular, then subside (for example, the ‘new weird’); while other subgenres arguably do not fit under the umbrella term at all (for example, slasher horror, which may not turn to the fantastic mode and, in fact, may be more usefully conceived as a subgenre of crime).

Of course this inability to define the limits of the genre is in keeping with what I have written above. And yet speculative fiction is a coherent genre for the devoted and active fan community that surrounds it. Readers in the genre, like readers in any genre, know it when they see it. It interpolates its readers effectively even as it excludes the non-readers (‘those wizard books’ as a reader of realist literary fiction once said to me). It is inadvisable to approach writing in this genre without having read in it widely, understood fully the depth and breadth of it and developed due reverence for the fantastic mode: how it is created and what pleasures it provides the reader. The rest of this chapter offers a place to start writing, but below are a few suggestions of where to start reading.

Classic: *Beowulf* (anonymous), *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (anonymous), *Macbeth* (William Shakespeare), *The Monk* (Matthew Lewis), *Frankenstein* (Mary Shelley), *Dracula* (Bram Stoker).

Contemporary: *Consider Phlebas* (Iain M. Banks), *American Gods* (Neil Gaiman), *Assassin’s Apprentice* (Robin Hobb), *Brown Girl in the Ring* (Nalo Hopkinson), *Dunston Wood* (William Horwood), *Ethan of Athos* (Lois McMaster Bujold), *Perdido Street Station* (China Miéville), *The Earthsea Quartet* (Ursula Le Guin), *Moonheart* (Charles de Lint), *The Baker’s Boy* (J. V. Jones), *Bold as Love* (Gwyneth Jones), *The Lord of the Rings* (J. R. R. Tolkien), *City of Saints and Madmen* (Jeff Vandermeer), *The Crooked Letter* (Sean Williams), *The Doomsday Book* (Connie Willis).

Contemporary short-story writers of note: Octavia Butler, Ted Chiang, Greg Egan, Jeff Ford, Margo Lanagan, Kelly Link, Robert Shearman, Lucius Shepherd, Angela Slatter, Michael Swanwick, Zoran Zivkovic.

Approaches

Realism

One of the chief pleasures of a speculative fiction narrative is the use of fantastic elements, for example magic, futuristic technology or paranormal occurrences. The paradox remains that those fantastic elements must be represented in a realistic way if they are to be effective. Henry James remarked that ‘[a] good

ghost-story must be connected at a hundred points with the common objects of life'.¹² The more realistically the fantastic elements are represented, the greater the feeling of immersion in the fantastic systems and logic of the story.

Some subgenres, in fact, derive much of their energy from the clash between realism and the fantastic. Urban fantasy relishes the careful building of realistic detail – usually, as the name suggests, within an industrialised urban setting – as a foil for ideas and effects that are radically pre-industrial. Neil Gaiman's *American Gods*, for example, reimagines figures from mythology into an American road novel. In the quotations below, Shadow, the protagonist, follows the mysterious Mr Wednesday (the Norse god Odin) into a roadside attraction that has supernatural wonders hidden in its centre.

The place seemed to be a geometrically reconfigured 1960s bachelor pad, with open stone work, pile carpeting and magnificently ugly mushroom-shaped stained-glass lampshades ... they walked past it into the pizzeria-cafeteria, empty but for an elderly black man, wearing a bright check suit and canary-yellow gloves ... A black cigarillo was burning in the ashtray in front of him.¹³

... and then the red and white lights of the carousel stretched and shivered and went out and he was falling through an ocean of stars, while the mechanical waltz was replaced by a pounding rhythmic roll and crash, as of cymbals or the breakers on the shores of a far ocean.¹⁴

Gaiman concentrates in the first quotation on details that are close and particular, layering the images one on top of another or relying on startling ideas or colours to create a strong and realistic picture in the reader's mind. He secures the reader in a present that is familiar and shared ('magnificently ugly' is associated with 1960s decor, for example, in a way that suggests a nudge-wink mutual sense of taste between author and reader). The details here are very much 'real-world' details – he writes of carpet and cafeterias and ashtrays – to anchor the reader in a world that they know. Once this sense of realism is established, Gaiman then turns to the fantastic, whipping the security of reality out from under the reader, so to speak, thereby enacting for the reader the sense of 'falling' through the fantastic setting. Proximity telescopes into distance. The feeling is one of defamiliarisation, a key pleasure in the speculative fiction genre.

Writing exercise

Write a descriptive scene of an urban setting, including as much realistic detail as possible. Now introduce into this setting a fantastic creature from mythology (e.g. a fairy, a basilisk, a figure from folklore). What patterns of contrast and comparison can you draw out? What do you think would happen next?

Not every speculative fiction novel has a real-world counterpart for contrast against fantastic events and images. A great deal of work in this genre creates new worlds entirely. Once again, realism plays its part in making a fantastic secondary world convincing. I want to concentrate in this section on the idea of emotional realism. My contention is that the best way to describe fantastic ideas is through the viewpoint of characters who have realistic and familiar reactions to the world around them, even if that world is unfamiliar. In fact, it is arguably more important for the characters in fantastic secondary worlds to have realistic reactions, to keep the fantastic elements anchored to lived experience.

In fact, one of the most powerful tools in the toolbox of writers in any genre is the ability to make viewpoint work. Your viewpoint characters are the characters whose thoughts and feelings you will represent in narrative, whose heads the reader will have access to and who experience the story for the reader. Viewpoint is a limited word because your characters offer more than view (sight); they offer access to a full physical and mental response. They experience the fantastic story in their minds and bodies, just as real people experience real lives in their minds and bodies.

You should aim in every scene to be tracking your viewpoint character's experience of the story. By this I mean their emotions and introspections, but also the *material effect* the story has on their body. Perhaps your character is an alien child who loses his mother in quadrant four of the Jupiter colony: if you describe that child's panic in ways that are familiar to your readers, you create a sympathetic connection between character and reader that deepens the reader's experience of the story because it has the ring of emotional truth about it.

Writing exercise

Remember last time you experienced fear. Now write down how that fear felt in every part of your body: feet, knees, stomach, hands, heart, scalp, ears, eyes and anything else you can think about. The idea is to map in detail the material impact of fear on the body. Now, place yourself as a character in a secondary fantasy world scenario, for example, entering a dragon's den. Write a short scene, transferring across those material details of fear to make the fantastic scene seem as emotionally real as possible.

The fantastic

Writing in the fantastic mode creates some wonderful opportunities for the creative imagination, but comes with its own set of concerns. Writing about unfamiliar objects and settings can be challenging and putting in enough

information without overwhelming the reader is tricky. Likewise, maintaining the logic of a created world is no small feat.

By far the commonest challenge writers of speculative fiction face is integrating the information necessary for readers to understand the fantastic systems and logic of the story. The ‘info dump’ has become a much-scorned technique, where the author crams as much information into a paragraph or page as possible, abstracting it from the characters in order to provide the information needed quickly. Of course, not just speculative fiction writers have to deal with integration of unfamiliar detail. Historical fiction writers, or any writers who use exotic settings and ideas will, at some stage, have to grapple with integrating those ideas so that they are understood.

This temptation to info dump can happen both at small or ‘line’ level and at large or ‘structural’ level. Often, writers of speculative fiction need to introduce objects or creatures beyond common experience. The writer could explain plainly what the object or creature is, but not only is that explanation abstracted out of the story, it can break the ‘fourth wall’ if it seems too much as though the author is addressing the reader directly. Jeff Vandermeer, in *City of Saints and Madmen*, accomplishes the task much more smoothly:

Eventually, he emerged from the alleyway onto a larger street, strewn with rubbish. A few babarusa pigs, all grunts and curved tusks, fought ... for the offal.¹⁵

The exotic creatures here, ‘babarusa pigs’, are defined immediately in terms of their appearance (curved tusks) and behaviour (grunting and fighting for offal). Moreover, they are framed through the character’s experience as it is he who sees them for the reader. (Babarusa pigs, it should be noted, are not fantastical creatures but a type of pig native to the eastern Indonesian islands; but the example still holds.)

At a structural level, info dumping most often occurs when filling out contextual detail, for example, history, lore or setting. The author becomes anxious that the reader comprehends enough about the context to follow the story, but this anxiety is usually misplaced. It is actually far more difficult to comprehend a huge amount of abstracted information delivered in one blow than it is to gradually learn the context through carefully integrated details. The best way to integrate information is to mete out small amounts consistently over a long period.

Robin Hobb’s *Assassin’s Apprentice*, an epic high-fantasy novel, features pre-industrial seaside settings. Hobb does not spend a page or two unfurling the backdrop, so to speak, so that she may put characters to work in the foreground. That kind of separation of background and foreground leads to a stagey feel: there is an uncomfortable constructedness about it. Instead, she

weaves small details, images and ideas into the story over the first few chapters. We see a little history about raiders from the sea,¹⁶ we learn of the lore of magic names that are '[p]assed through fire and plunged through salt water and offered to the winds of the air'.¹⁷ A historian writes with 'sea-spawned ink'.¹⁸ A character notes 'the unfamiliar warmth of the sea breeze'¹⁹ and 'the brackish iodine smell of the immense water'.²⁰ Then a more extended introspection about the smell of the sea is introduced: 'The smell of the bay was stronger as if the day-smells of men and horses and cooking were temporary things that had to surrender each night to the ocean's power.'²¹ The main character, Fitz, notes that he has learned 'a smattering of trades': 'fish-buying, net-mending, boat-building'.²² All of this adds up, over an extended period, to a strong sense of context, particularly setting, without an info dump in sight.

Writing exercise

Take a common object from everyday life (e.g. a paintbrush, a bicycle, a bookshelf). Now try to explain what it is to somebody who has never seen one, without describing it directly. If it helps, give the object a defamiliarised name.

The other side of this coin is that many writers give us too little description, especially when setting action in an exotic or unusual setting. It creates a problem known as 'white space': action and dialogue are happening, but they seem detached from the surroundings. The reader can't visualise the scene and so it loses its impact and invites skimming. Two useful words here are *orient* and *anchor*. In each scene, you should aim to orient the reader quickly, then anchor the setting securely in their imagination.

Within the first two paragraphs of a scene, earlier if possible, you should orient the reader. Where are we? Is it day or night? Inside or outside? Are there crowds of people around, or nobody? And, of course, whose head are we in? Then, within one double-spaced page, earlier if possible, you should aim to put in a set of anchor points using specific images: towering bookshelves, furniture under dust covers, boarded-over windows. It is fine to cluster them tightly together, but do it with a light touch. These anchor points begin to map the white space for your reader: already they are starting to see and feel the setting. The next step is to start evoking the other senses in little beats: the faint smell of mould, the creak of a floorboard, the itch of dust on the lips. These beats are spread throughout the action, are part of the narrative rather than standing outside it – a little here, a little there – and as much as possible they are attached to a viewpoint character. You are recording the effect of the setting on somebody's senses and somebody's thoughts:

The room smelled of food, of beer and men's sweat, of wet wool garments and the smoke of the wood and drip of grease into flames . . . My stomach clutched my ribs suddenly against the smell.²³

The specific sensory impressions here are evocative, but they gather their full weight and meaning when we apprehend them through the material reaction of a viewpoint character.

In fantastic fiction, it is important to emphasise the fantastic elements of setting and to spend time on fantastic detail to create the sense of wonder that readers expect from the genre. Describing these unfamiliar things through familiar comparisons can evoke a feeling of strangeness or the exotic without being too heavy-handed. For example, say you have a fantasy world with two suns. Instead of resorting to the abstracted (and clichéd) 'he watched as the two suns set', describe instead something familiar (perhaps, sun shining on long waving grass) with the fantasy twist (where are the shadows? are there two? does it create a rolling effect, like waves?). These concrete, familiar descriptions are more engaging and help to build that crucial sense that this fantastic world of the imagination has depth and breadth.

Writing exercise

Come up with a well-worn fantastic setting (e.g. a castle, a spaceship, a haunted house) and a well-worn plot idea to match it (e.g. the wizard dispensing mentorship, a laser gun battle, a young couple sheltering from a storm). Now, applying the rules of orient and anchor, can you make the setting come alive? If the setting feels detailed and deep, can it actually lift the action out of cliché?

One of the key challenges facing writers of the fantastic is how to build an entire secondary fantastic world. This skill, known as 'world building', is far more difficult than popular opinion might have it. There is no 'just making it up'. J. R. R. Tolkien writes of how the 'story-maker' creates 'a Secondary World which your mind can enter. Inside it, what he relates is "true": it accords with the laws of that world. You therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside.'²⁴ A secondary fantasy world must cohere logically and convincingly, must be fully mapped in time and space and must be integrated at all levels with the lives of the characters who people it. This daunting task is best broken down into three processes: reading, living and writing.

Reading refers to the process of taking in information that can inspire ideas for how the secondary world operates. By this, I certainly do not mean merely reading inside the genre to discover and adapt what other writers have done. What I do mean is research. A fantasy novel set in a faux-medieval world written after researching the actual medieval period is likely to be more

sophisticated in scope than a copy-of-a-copy, where the genre elements have worn so smooth they no longer have the power to engage. Likewise, approaching science fiction via an open-minded reading of scientific research rather than a brief review of the *Star Wars* movies will provide for the author much more scope for building a convincing world. That is not to say that fantasy fiction is only worthy if it is historically accurate, or science fiction is only worthy if it is ‘hard’ science fiction. Consider Lois McMaster Bujold’s *Ethan of Athos*, part of her *Vorkosigan* science fiction series: the plot revolves around a missing item, in this case, ovarian tissues. The premise is that a male-only colony reproduces with uterine replication technology and the tissues are needed because the existing stock is ageing. Clearly, reading and research have gone into the science behind the world building, allowing for a sophisticated and interesting context.

Living refers to remembering that there must always be a balance between the ‘big picture’ of world building and the lived experience of the characters in that world. World building does not have to be approached from the outside in: that is, starting with geography, history, religion, etc. It can usefully be approached from the inside out: that is, starting with a character and tracking that character through a typical day of life as it is lived, to discover which aspects of the world are most important to develop for the story’s purposes. This task involves taking a notebook with you for the day and writing down everything you do. From this list, you begin to map lived experience so that you can adapt it. ‘I had breakfast’ translates into a series of questions about common foods, their source, how they are grown or transported, how they are received culturally and so on. This appeals to me particularly because it means that at the heart of fantastic creation is, once again, ordinary realism. I have known many budding fantasy writers who fill notebooks with details about the facts of their secondary worlds, but until those facts are mobilised in relation to characters, they remain abstract. The danger also exists that, because the writer has taken the time to develop the ideas, they must appear somewhere in the story even if they don’t naturally fit. Writers of speculative fiction, like all writers, must learn to serve the story before they serve themselves.

Finally, writing refers to the process of making journeys into secondary worlds before they are properly ‘finished’. The rationale here is that until you actually start writing about your characters in your world, you won’t know what details you might need: so writing becomes something like a reconnaissance operation. When you hit a white space, it is time to go back to the world building. In the meantime, you are getting to know your character better and testing out the boundaries. Your secondary world is provisional right up until it goes into print: the process of reading, living and writing is iterative.

You cycle through and repeat through first and second drafts and beyond. Eventually, you will know that secondary world as well as you know your own.

Writing exercise

Look around you right now. What aspects of your real, lived existence would have to be reconfigured and reimagined if you were building a world for an epic high-fantasy novel. Choose an aspect of your world (e.g. study practices, food culture, transport) and derive from it a list of questions to be answered about your secondary world.

Structure

Genre fiction is often assumed to be more bound by structure than literary fiction, which is expected to be more experimental. While it is probably nominally true that literary fiction is more concerned with style than structure, really no story can dispense with good structure altogether.

My chief contention in this section is that stories should have a beginning, middle and end and that managing the proportions of those parts of the narrative structure is crucial for pleasing and persuasive pace, especially in longer forms. A recent emphasis on three-part narrative structure in the pedagogy of commercial scriptwriting has meant a perception that Hollywood ‘invented’ the structure for its purposes. That is not the case. As long as there have been novels they have had front covers, back covers and pages in between. A story has a rhythm: a set-up, a development, a resolution. This rhythm is in line with the expectations of the reader about narrative structure. There is much enjoyment to be gained from the three-part structure.

To understand the rhythm of story, we can loosely adapt the Freudian ideas of the pleasure principle and the death drive. That is, story can be seen as an interplay between the desire to stay forever in pleasure and the desire to return to an inert state. Or, if you prefer the classics, narrative structure grows from an interplay between *eros* (desire) and *thanatos* (death). We all know the intense gratification of being in the midst of a huge novel, wanting to stay lost in the story forever and yet at the same time finding ourselves unable to stop turning the pages and racing towards the resolution. While most good story-telling uses this structure, speculative fiction thrives on it because so much of the pleasure of the reading experience is taken where the world building unfolds (*the pleasure principle/eros*).

The three parts – beginning, middle, end – have different functions (introducing, developing and resolving) and should represent different proportions

of the story. This is not, and can never be, an exact science. But a beginning that takes up more than 25 to 30 per cent of the word count can drag, making the reader wonder when the story will start to develop. If the middle takes up roughly half of the word count, leaving an ending equal to or a little shorter than the beginning, there is a feeling of substantial development and economical resolution. Readers can enjoy the set-up, take their pleasure stuck in the middle for a long time and then be pulled through on the tide of the end. (Short fiction often has a longer middle and a shorter end, but I am using the novel as the main example of form in this section, because narrative structure is so important to the success of the novel.)

These ideas rely on there being relatively clear transition points, at least for the writer, between the beginning and middle and the middle and end. These transition points are like gear changes in the narrative structure: if you listen closely enough, you will nearly always hear them in good storytelling. Certainly, they are evident in the work of Shakespeare. *Macbeth*, a speculative fiction story about witches and ghosts, has very clearly marked transition points. The beginning of the story introduces us to Macbeth and his wife, to the prophecy of the witches and the plan for murder. Macbeth kills Duncan one-fifth of the way into the story (at the end of act I), signalling the end of the beginning. Here is the first gear change: the story has kicked off and moves into the next gear. The first transition point is an indicator that the beginning is over and the middle is upon us.

The second transition point is a more slippery customer than the first. The escalating sense of conflict throughout the middle should generate a number of scenes that ‘up the ante’, so to speak (see my section on episodic narrative below). But only one changes gears and propels us into the ending. Broadly speaking, the second transition point is an indicator that matters have become so intense as to force an ending either way. A Rubicon is crossed, a die is cast, a watershed moment is reached: the amount of clichés available to me here demonstrates just how entrenched the idea of a ‘point of no return’ is in narrative. When Macbeth returns to the witches and consciously aligns himself with evil, we hear the gear change clearly: the ending is rushing upon us now. With the transition points in place, you have the spine of the story. Writing it is as simple (and as horribly complex) as negotiating the distance between them with scenes.

Writing exercise

Think about a story you may be working on in terms of the parts and their transition points and build a ‘plot skeleton’. Does it help you to conceptualise the story from outside?

Fantasy fiction, particularly epic high fantasy, is one of the genres that can fall too easily into an episodic structure. Other genres, such as the women's romance saga or the historical novel, are also at risk. The narrative can start to look like a long string of events of equal interest, which are nominally connected but lack coherence. Tension is concentrated only in each event, rather than building slowly over the course of the story. It is what Kate Forsyth, borrowing from Elbert Hubbard, calls 'just one damned thing after another'.²⁵

The episodic feel is usually concentrated in the middle of the narrative. Take, for example, the classic quest narrative. After the character hears the call to adventure and gathers resources for heading out on the quest, the narrative becomes a chain of events – travel to location, something happens, repeat – rather than a story with a sense of overarching development and slowly rising tension. It can help here to divide up the middle into three parts. They are all still performing the function of the middle, that is, developing the promise of the beginning towards the pay-off of the ending, but they differ from each other slightly. The first part pays more attention to the *eros* principle: this is the place for world building, for indulging the reader, engaging their senses while still gently tugging on the narrative so they are drawn forward. The second part balances the two principles, shading slowly from *eros* to *thanatos*. The third part pays more attention to the *thanatos* principle: scenes grow shorter, feature more action and drama, the stakes get higher. Using these ideas as a guide, it quickly becomes clear when a scene can be there simply to develop the world and when it needs to be pulling its weight in terms of moving the plot forward.

The second book of J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, *The Two Towers*, is characterised by an episodic structure. While it is inadvisable either to criticise Tolkien (without whom the fantasy genre may not exist), or to judge by contemporary taste a novel written many decades ago, comparing the written version of *The Two Towers* with Peter Jackson's film version demonstrates very well the point I am trying to make here. Jackson reworks the battle at Helm's Deep, just one equal episode in the written version, as a narrative crisis point. All the events that come before it refer to it or point towards it in some way. The Frodo and Sam plot, once a completely separate section in the written version, is interleaved between the stories of the rest of the Fellowship, gaining extra narrative purpose. The tension around whether or not Gollum can be trusted now builds to a climactic moment (when Frodo betrays Gollum to Faramir), which screens close to the Helm's Deep crisis point and is therefore revealed as a crisis point itself.

Writing exercise

Jot down the random events of your day. Now see how you can reshape them towards a notional narrative crisis point, say, eating your dinner. What images, introspections, subtle shifts of meaning would you have to add to those ordinary events to make them seem to signal towards the crisis of dinner time?

I have been writing in the speculative fiction genre for fifteen years and have never felt constrained by it nor felt frustrated by any sense of limitation. I am still a heavy reader in the genre too. What initially attracted me to speculative fiction is the precise same thing that continues to attract me: the use of the fantastic. But while the core of the genre has held, the range of texts that I have read (and, indeed, written) and enjoyed is vast. I have enjoyed texts that play with the genre and push at its boundaries, such as the strange and defamiliarising short stories of Zoran Zivkovic or the mind-bending world building of Jeff Vandermeer. I have enjoyed, too, perfectly generic epic high fantasy, space opera and vampire novels. And I have enjoyed the send-ups of speculative fiction provided by authors such as Terry Pratchett and Diana Wynne-Jones: pleasure is still available to ‘serious’ speculative-fiction readers in parodic and ironic texts. In no way do I feel I have exhausted the possibilities available to me in this genre and I am confident, too, that I never will. Once we move past the idea that genre is somehow a brake on the writer’s imagination, the pleasures and possibilities will be there for all to see.

NOTES

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