

THREE ARTICLES by Jonathan Fesmire

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WHAT IS FANTASY

You've all seen the science fiction and fantasy section in book stores, the paperback covers sporting images of strange people and even stranger beasts. Still, you may wonder what exactly makes a fantasy story. Is it just unicorns and dragons, or is there something more? Interestingly enough, you may already be a fantasy fan and not know it.

First, I'll explain the differences between science fiction, fantasy, and horror. "Speculative Fiction" is the parent genre of all three, literature that uses fantastic, non-real elements. In science fiction, these elements are scientifically plausible, or at least scientifically portrayed. In fantasy, the elements are events, beings, and circumstances that simply could not happen in reality. The author makes no attempt to explain them scientifically, because they are, instead, magical. You have horror fiction when either the scientific or fantastic element creates something frightening.

For a story to be fantasy, magic must play a central role, because fantasy is about magic.

We need a working definition of magic. Some people believe in real magic, and that by properly using magical energy, they can change their lives. Prayer can be considered essentially the same thing. In fantasy, this is heightened. Wizards use spells with very obvious effects, such as shooting a ball of fire from their hands or immediately healing a deep cut. Magic also includes what is blatantly outside our reality and not portrayed scientifically, anything from mythical creatures to wishes coming true.

Fantasy has many traditions and sub-genres. One of the most popular is high fantasy, exemplified in Tolkien's "Lord of the Rings." High fantasy involves powerful, and often royal, characters in world-threatening situations. Sword and sorcery focuses on medieval style battles and magic. Light fantasy is absurd or humorous, and has roots such fiction as Louis Carroll's "Alice in Wonderland," and "Through the Looking Glass." Another popular tradition is basing one's fantasy world on real mythology. For example, Lloyd Alexander's Prydain is based on Celtic Wales. If you're not familiar with this world, it was the basis for Disney's, "The Black Cauldron."

It takes but one magical element to create a fantasy story. Movies give us some clear examples. Some movie are clearly fantasy, such as "The Dark Crystal" or "Dragonheart," but you've likely seen movies and not realized they were actually fantasy. "Groundhog Day," "Liar Liar," "Big," and "Who Framed Roger Rabbit" are all fantasy stories. You won't find any of them in the science fiction and fantasy section of a video rental store, but they each have a premise based on magic.

Aside from that, fantasy is an excellent medium for exploring morality. All the movies I've mentioned do this, as does most fantasy literature. At the most basic level, many fantasy novels are about good and evil. Often, however, this is not so clear, and the reader must make up his own mind. You'll rarely find a

fantasy short story or novel preach, but odds are it will get you to think about what is right and what is wrong. A writer can explore situations that would never happen in real life. However, if they could happen, they may test people to their limits, make them question what is truly right or wrong. Often, the issue that comes up does happen in real life, but fantasy exaggerates it.

I hope this gives a broad picture of fantasy literature. If you want to write fantasy, then read it. I also recommend "The Writer's Complete Fantasy Reference" from Writer's Digest Books. The Internet is also full of helpful information.

SUSPENSION OF DISBELIEF

If you were to tell people that you encountered a dragon on the way to work, that you can shapeshift into the form of a bat, or anything so fantastic, would anyone believe it? They would probably wonder what kind of joke you were up to.

Readers have a good sense of what's believable and what isn't. So how do fantasy writers get away with such stories? How do they get readers to buy into fictional worlds and events based on magic?

In speculative fiction, we use the term "Suspension of Disbelief." If you write fantasy, you'll run across it often. Though they may not realize it, this is a technique readers use to get into fantasy stories. It's the writer's responsibility to facilitate this.

Suspending disbelief means buying into the world of the story. The writer says that magic works, so the reader accepts this within the story's world. However, readers won't believe just anything.

As I said in my last article, "What is Fantasy?" a fantasy story is any with magic at its heart, and therefore many people are fantasy fans without realizing it. Movies such as "Pleasantville" and "What Dreams May Come" are fantasy tales. Such stories are grounded in our everyday reality which makes suspension of disbelief easier. Some of these very people may feel unable to suspend disbelief when reading sword and sorcery tales. Different readers can suspend disbelief to varying degrees, and it's difficult to write a fantasy story that everyone will buy into.

Besides all the usual difficulties in writing, fantasy authors deal with making the impossible seem real. It can be tempting to think, "Anything goes!" The writer must create the rules and let the reader know them early. Developing a magic system as though it were a science is helpful. Some authors say that magic must have a price, and certainly it needs limits.

In my fantasy world, Taibril, some people are born with the gift of magic, and some are not. Among those that are, each person has certain areas of talent. One may be gifted at divination, healing, elemental magic, enchantment, or some other type. Wizards draw magical energy from things such as leaves, stones, and their own bodies.

Decide what is possible and how the magic works before you write. Figure out the rules for your story, and stick to them. This can be as simple as one fantastic element, or as complex as a whole new fantasy world. You're trying to entertain the reader, to draw them into a world that they will enjoy, but also to make that world easy to accept.

Suspension of disbelief starts with the story's first word and continues long after the last. Readers should look back on the story and still accept the fantastic within it. So, avoid the dreaded "deus ex

machina," bringing in some new element at the end of a story to solve the problems. This can be more tempting in fantasy than in any other genre, and can kill the entire story. Stick to the rules you've created and use them for an effective ending.

Readers of fantasy want to suspend their disbelief, but will do so only if you stick to the rules you establish. I suggest reading the kind of fantasy you'd like to write to get a feel for it, and of course, write it. There's no better practice.

A NEW WAY OF SEEING ALIEN LIFE

When we wonder what life on other planets is like, we must first ask if there is life on other planets. Well, we don't know for certain if there is or not, but I believe there lots of it, intelligent and otherwise.

So, for the sake of this article, I'm making the assumption that life on other planets does exist. *Now*, what might it be like?

It seems to me that scientists have jumped to the wrong conclusions by assuming that, if we just listen for signals long enough, we'll make contact. They keep watching the skies, listening for messages from other planets. And they have yet to find conclusive evidence of life "out there."

Of course, you could buy into the theory that the government is keeping information from us, with Area 51 and all. That may be true.

Some of the rumors are quite convincing. But for the sake of this article, let's forget about the aliens supposedly visiting Earth. Let's take the position that those particular aliens don't exist.

Scientists have received no definite signs of transmissions from other planets, radio or otherwise. What they get from space is essentially random background noise. If the odds are as high as some scientists believe that the galaxy is heavily populated, then why have we detected nothing that shows that there is alien life out there?

Let's look at some facts, and see if we can come up with a theory.

The universe is billions of years old. Our own sun is five billion years old. In all that time, how long has a society on Earth had the capability of sending messages out into space? Not for long. Less than a century. Maybe we'll be lucky and stay at such a technological level for another ten thousand years. I doubt it, but let's say that we will. Even so, that's a minuscule amount of time in terms of our galaxy and the universe.

Assume that each of the populated planets out there gets to a point where they have this kind of technology, and it lasts for ten thousand years. What are the odds that any of their ten thousand year periods would overlap ours? Well, in one billion years, just one-fifth the age of our sun, there would be one hundred thousand of these ten millennium periods.

There's an incredibly high chance that none of these civilizations would cross over each other at all.

Here's something else scientists don't seem to realize: Our own "rise" to civilization may have been the biggest fluke in human history.

"What?" I can hear you ask. "Come on now, man was destined to be a civilization builder!"

Not quite. Because by human history, I don't mean our history over the last ten thousand years. That's merely about five percent of human history. Actually, five percent of homo sapiens sapiens history. Various earlier humans go back further still.

I'm looking at human history as starting when modern humans first came into being upon this planet, about two hundred thousand years ago. They lived as tribal people. Their way of life worked for them, and worked with the rest of the community of life on this planet.

Ten thousand years ago, the agricultural revolution started in the fertile crescent, and that eventually led to our present civilization. But the agricultural revolution was **not** an inevitability. It was strange, because those who started it began working very hard, rather than hunting, gathering, and perhaps farming just a bit. Previously, they must have had much more leisure time, so their going to work to produce excesses of food seems a bizarre decision. Most people these days would take more leisure time if they could get it! Full time farming is hard work!

Why did they do it? Perhaps because it allowed them to create a surplus of food. Also, they must have also believed that their way was the only way for people to live, because not only did **they** work hard on farming, they also went around converting other tribes to their way of life! How else would the agricultural revolution have spread?

Now, before you point out several civilizations that arose elsewhere, such as the Aztecs, let me mention why those are different. They worked hard, but they did not force their way of life on others. The Aztecs even conquered many other tribes, but once they had succeeded, they let those tribes live as they wanted to. There was no attempt to convert them to Aztec life.

Indeed, this **does** all tie into the issue of contact with alien life. That huge cultural move eventually led to our current level of technology, and our ability to send radio and television signals.

Now, if my hypothesis is correct and the agricultural revolution really was an unlikely, bizarre event, then what are the odds the same thing happened elsewhere in the galaxy, or even in the universe?

Even more daunting, what are the odds that this happened with another species on another planet, **and** that their ability to send and receive radio waves would coincide with ours?

Of course, there may have been signals sent out millennia ago. Light, as we all know, moves faster than anything else, but still takes time. Even the closest stars are several light-years away, and most are unbelievably distant. These hypothetical civilizations would not have to exist at the same time as ours for us to receive their messages. However, what would the odds be that their societies existed during the perfect time for their signals to reach us during a time that we could receive them?

Pretty slim, I believe.

Here's what I think. There is intelligent life out there. There has been, and there will be. A rise to higher intelligence, if we take evolution on Earth as a model, seems the natural progression. Other species, such as whales, dolphins, and chimpanzees, seem sentient, or close to sentience.

However, the intelligent life on other planets is probably not "civilized." My guess is that it's tribal life, species that lack the technology to send messages into space. Odds are, they have no need to look to the stars for friends, enemies, or answers. That's an example we should learn from. And we can, right

here at home, by learning the lessons of people who lived before we decided to take farming to its extreme, and to assume that a rise to civilization is man's natural path.