

On Writing Fantasy

ONE of the first and most common questions put to any writer is: "Where do you get your ideas?" That is sometimes difficult to answer in particulars, but in general, the one source one must rely on is reading. In fact, the writer must read widely in many fields. For my own books (unless I am dealing with some specific period of history when research becomes highly concentrated) I read anthropology, folklore, history, travel, natural history, archeology, legends, studies in magic, and similiar material, taking notes throughout.

But the first requirement for writing heroic or sword and sorcery fantasy must be a deep interest in and a love for history itself. Not the history of dates, of sweeps and empires—but the kind of history which deals with daily life, the beliefs, and aspirations of people long since dust. (And it is amazing to find such telling parallels between a more ancient world and ours, as in the letter from the young Roman officer, quoted by Jack Lindsay in *The Romans Were Here*, who was writing home for money in much the same terms as might be used by a modern G.I.) While there are many things we can readily accept in these delvings into other times, there are others we must use imagination to translate.

There we can find aids in novels—the novels of those inspired writers who seem, by some touch of magic, to have actually visited a world of the past. There are flashes of brilliance in such novels, illuminating strange landscapes and ideas. To bring to life the firelit interior of a Pictish broch (about whose inhabitants even the most industrious of modern archeologists can tell us little) is, for example, a feat of real magic.

Read such books as Price's *Made In the Middle Ages*—then turn from her accounts of the great medieval fairs to the colorful description of the Thieves' Market in Van Arnan's *The Players of Hell*.

Renault's *The King Must Die*: here is Crete, and something within the reader is satisfied that this must be close to reality. Joan Grant's Egypt of *The Eyes of Horus* and *The Lord of The Horizon*, Mundy's *Tros of Samothrace* and the *Purple Pirate*—Rome at the height of its arrogant power but as seen by a non-Roman—the wharves of Alexandria in the torchlight of night, the great sea battles, a clash of arms loud enough to stir any reader.

Turn from those to the muted despair and dogged determination against odds in Rosemary Sutcliff's Britain after the withdrawal of the last legion—the beginning of the Dark Ages—as described in *The Lantern Bearers* and *Swords in the Sunset*. This lives, moves, involves the reader in emotion.

Davis's *Winter Serpent* presents the Viking coastal raids, makes very clear what it meant to live under the shadow of the "Winged Hats." And, a little later, the glories and the grim cruelties of the Middle Ages are a flaming tapestry of color in such novels as Barringer's *Gerfalcon* and its sequel, *Joris of the Rock*; Adam's *Desert Leopard* and Graham's *Vows of the Peacock* are also excellent.

There are "historical" novels, but their history is all sensuous color, heroic action raised to the point where the reader is thoroughly ensorcelled and involved.

So history is the base, and from there to imagination, rooted in fact, sun-warmed by inspired fiction, can flower into new patterns. And those can certainly be ingenious and exciting.

The very atmosphere of some portion of the past can be carried into fantasy in a telling fashion. Take Meade's *Sword of Morningstar*, which gathers in the telling validity from the author's interest and research into the history of the Robber Barons of Germany and the Black Forest region. Beam Piper's *Lord Kevin of Otherwhen* envisions a world in which the sweep of the migrating Aryan peoples—the People of the Axe—turned east instead of west, flowing through Asia, China, to eventually colonize this continent from the west instead of the east, with an entirely different affect on history.

Though historical novels can furnish impetus for story growth, the basic need is still history. General history can be mined at will, but

there are various byways which are very rich in background material.

Herrmann's *Conquest of Man*, a fat volume to open new vistas as it discusses the far range of those Bronze Age traders who set out in their small ships hugging unknown coastlines in the Atlantic, or the North Seas, or went on foot with their trains of laden donkeys into new lands. Thus he presents a wealth of new knowledge barely touched upon by the usual history book.

Four Thousand Years Ago by Bibby—a world spread of history at a single date. What were the Chinese doing when Pharaohs held the throne of Egypt? And what then was going on in Peru, Central America?

Lewis Spense's careful studies of near forgotten legend and lore in his native British Isles, *Magic Arts in Celtic Britain* and the like, are very rich in nuggets to be used.

Rees gives us *Celtic Heritage*, Uden the beautifully illustrated *Dictionary of Chivalry*, Oakeshott's *Archeology of Weapons*—page after page of information on swords, shields, any other armament your hero needs.

Desire a new godling to squat in some shadowed temple? Try *Everyman's Dictionary of Non-Classical Mythology* and be straightway amazed at all the diverse gods the men of this world bowed head to down the ages.

For the layout of a castle, plus the numeration of a proper staff to man it, try Byfield's delightful *The Glass Harmonica* (which also goes into careful detail on such matters as trolls, ogres, and the training of sorcerers); it is indispensable. And Thompson's *The Folktale*, a careful listing of the basic plot of every known tale and its many variations, is a book to keep to hand.

The professional writer does have to build up his or her own library, though the rich shelves of the public libraries await. Unfortunately, many of the volumes one wishes the most for reference are also the most expensive. But there is an answer—the remainder houses which send out at monthly or six-weeks periods catalogues of their stock. For one half, one third of the original price one can pick up such volumes when dealing with Marboro or Publishers Central Bureau. And, in recent years, the paperback house of Dover has been reissuing long out of print works in folklore, history and natural history.

So, one has the material, one has the plot—now comes the presentation. One must make come alive for the reader what one has created in one's mind.

Rider Haggard, who was the master of the romantic action adventure at its birth, stated firmly that those who write such books must themselves live in their creations, share every hope and care of their people. And this is the truth; you can not write fantasy unless you love it, unless you yourself can believe in what you are telling. (Unfortunately, as every writer learns, that which goes on paper, in spite of all one's struggles, is never the bright and shining vision which appeared in one's mind and led one to get to work. At times a scene, a page—if one is exceedingly lucky, a chapter—may draw close to the dream, but one is always left unsatisfied with the whole.)

The approach may be direct in the use of ancient saga or legendary material without much alteration. And this can result in excellence if done by a skillful craftsman who has steeped him or herself in the subject. In this category are such outstanding books as Walton's *Island of the Mighty*, those books by Thomas Swan based on classical myths, Garner's two stories based on ancient legends of Britain: *Weirdstone of Brisinggamen* and *Moon of Gomrath*. While Poul Anderson drew first on Scandinavian sources for *The Broken Sword*, and then on the Charlemagne cycle for *Three Hearts and Three Lions*, Emil Petaja works from a classic lesser known to the general American public when he draws from the Finish Kalevala for a series of adventures. And Sprague de Camp has given us *The Incomplete Inchanter* with its roots in Spencer's *Faerie Queen: The Land of Unreason*—Oberon's kingdom plus the legend of Barbarossa; and *The Wall of Serpents*, another presentation from the Kalevala. Nicholas Gray has turned directly to fairy tales, writing the haunting and memorable *Seventh Swan* and the amusing *Stone Cage*. The former "what happened after" in the fairy tale of the Seven Swans wherein the hero, the seventh brother of that story, is forced to adjust to living with a swan's wing in place of his arm. While in the latter, he gives a new and sprightly version of Rapunzel.

From that background of general legend comes the work of masters who are so well read in such lore that they create their own gods and sagas, heroes and mysteries. Tolkein's Middle Earth is now so deeply embeded in our realm that his name need only be

mentioned to provide a mountain-tall standard against which other works will be measured perhaps for generations to come.

Lord Dunsay is another of the masters. Eddison's *Worm Oroborous* is perhaps a little mannered in style for modern taste, but his descriptions are, like Merritt's, so overflowing in color and vivid beauty they flash across one's mind in sweeps of hues and forms one readily remembers.

To sample some of these earlier writers one can at present easily turn to the series of books under the editorship of Lin Carter—issued by Ballantine—where for the first time in many years some of the older, and to this generation perhaps even unknown, writers are introduced again. Such books as *Dragons, Elves and Heroes, The Young Magicians, Golden Cities, Far* provide small tastes. But this series also reprints in full length the works of William Morris, Dunsay, Cabell and kindred writers.

Those modern writers who create their own worlds stand well when measured to these pioneers, with some pruning of the dated flourishes of another day.

Hannes Bok, who was an artist with paint and brush, as well as with pen, produced *The Sorcerer's Ship*. Using the classic saga approach of the quest we have such treats as Van Arnan's *Players of Hell* and its sequel *Wizard of Storms*. David Mason gives us two excellent examples of the careful building of an entire world detailed to the full in *Kavin's World* and *The Sorcerer's Skull*. Ursula Le Guin has *Wizard of Earthsea*, an offering which not only presents a strange island-sea planet but makes clear the training of a would-be sorcerer, and the need for self-control in handling great forces. Jack Vance explores a far future in which our almost exhausted world turns to magic in its last days in his *Dying Earth*. And Katherine Kurtz with *Deryni Rising* pictures a dramatic meeting of alien forces in a strange setting loosely based on Welsh myths.

The common pattern of most sword and sorcery tales which incline to action-adventure is a super-man hero, generally a wandering mercenary (which is an excellent device for moving your hero about). Of this company Robert Howard's Conan is perhaps the best known—unless one may list Burroughs's John Carter thus. Howard's plots may have been stereotyped, but his descriptions of sinister ruins and sharp clash of action move the stories into leadership in the field. We now have John Jakes's Brak, a Viking type wanderer whose adventures tend to get better with each book.

There is also Lin Carter's Thonger of Lemuria. And the unbeatable Grey Mouser and Ffahrd whom Fritz Leiber moves about an ancient world seeming to have some parts in common with our own middle east, but highly alien in others.

From the super-man we come to Moorcock's flawed heroes who tend to have massive faults as well as abilities, swinging sometimes to evil. The Elric of the demon-souled sword, and he of the four Runestaff stories are ambivalent.

There are moments of humor in the adventures of the Grey Mouser and his companion in arms, the great northerner Ffahrd. But Sprague de Camp, almost alone of the writers of fantasy, can handle the humorous element as a continued and integrated part of the adventure itself. His teller of tales who is also a doughty fighting man, the hero of *The Goblin Tower*, is something quite different from the humorless Conan or the stormy men of Moorcock. Only the much put-upon magician of Bellairs's *Face in the Frost* can compare with him.

Brunner's *Traveller in Black* is still another type. A troubler of the status quo, he does not fight, merely uses his own form of magic to adjust the scales of alien gods in many lands. Wandering by the demands of some strange pattern he does not understand, on a timeless mission decreed by something beyond the human, he seems to drift, and yet his adventures have all the power of straight action.

These are the heroes, but what of the heroines? In the Conan tales there are generally beautiful slave girls, one pirate queen, one woman mercenary. Conan lusts, not loves, in the romantic sense, and moves on without remembering face or person. This is the pattern followed by the majority of the wandering heroes. Witches exist, so do queens (always in need of having their lost thrones regained or shored up by the hero), and a few come alive. As do de Camp's women, the thief-heroine of *Wizard of Storm*, the young girl in the Garner books, the Sorceress of *The Island of the Mighty*. But still they remain props of the hero.

Only C. L. Moore, almost a generation ago, produced a heroine who was as self-sufficient, as deadly with a sword, as dominate a character as any of the swordsmen she faced. In the series of stories recently published as *Jirel of Joiry* we meet the heroine in her own right, and not to be down-cried before any armed company.

When I came to write *Year of the Unicorn*, it was my wish to spin a story distantly based on the old tale of Beauty and the Beast. I had already experimented with some heroines who interested me, the Witch Jaelithe and Loyse of Verlane. But to write a full book from the feminine point of view was a departure. I found it fascinating to write, but the reception was oddly mixed. In the years now since it was first published I have had many letters from women readers who accepted Gillan with open arms, and I have had masculine readers who hotly resented her.

But I was encouraged enough to present a second heroine, the Sorceress Kaththea. And since then I have written several more shorter stories, both laid in Witch World and elsewhere, spun about a heroine instead of a hero. Perhaps now will come a shift in an old pattern; it will be most interesting to watch and see.

At any rate, there is no more imagination stretching form of writing, nor reading, than the world of fantasy. The heroes, heroines, colors, action, linger in one's mind long after the book is laid aside. And how wonderful it would be if world gates did exist and one could walk into Middle Earth, Kavin's World, the Land of Unreason, Atlantis, and all the other never-nevers! We have the windows to such worlds and must be content with those.

To offer a complete reference list would be a librarian's task and run for more pages than space allows. So the following bibliography is a restricted and personal one. In the non-fiction I list books which I found particularly rich in ideas for my own writing, and yet, I believe, would interest the browsing reader, too.

In the fiction you will find the fantasy books mentioned as good examples and worthy yardsticks to measure by.

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