



Aurealis Magazine

Where do you get your ideas from? Editorial — Aurealis #31

It's surely the most oft asked question fielded by authors, and of particular importance in the speculative genre which is, by its very nature, an art form of ideas. Avid fans, dazzled by the concepts laid bare in the latest fantasy series or SF blockbuster turn the last page, draw a breath, and think to themselves, 'How on earth did they come up with that?' So, quite naturally, when they manage to corner their favourite author at a bookshop signing or convention, they just have to know.

The trouble is, unless you're very, very lucky and the author has a spare half hour to kick around the whys and wherefores with you, the answer you receive is probably not going to be all that illuminating. One reason is there are a hundred other people standing in line behind you all clutching a copy of the author's latest offering and wishing you'd just hurry up and get out of the way so they can have their turn. The other reason is, as questions go, it's not very specific and so it invites a response couched in generalities.

So for this issue of Aurealis, we've taken a slightly different tack and made the question very specific. We asked a group of our most prominent speculative fiction authors two questions: what story are you working on at the moment? and where exactly did the central idea for the story come from? The answers we received were very revealing and I'd like to thank everyone involved for their prompt and candid responses.

In this issue, Jack Dann, one of our most talented imports to date, takes you on a brief tour of some of the creative seeds that led to the strange blooms contained within his oeuvre; Van Ikin interviews Cameron Rogers about the Aurealis Award-shortlisted author's own creative processes, and — for this issue only — our featured authors tag the end of their stories with what led them to write their pieces in the first place.

The upshot of all this is that, hopefully, we'll grant the most fervent wish of speculative fiction fans everywhere: providing that much sought after insight on the author's creative processes.

I guess, as a writer and editor, I had a secondary motive for asking the questions I did. I've often wondered whether writing speculative fiction was a skill that could be learnt, or whether good speculative fiction writers were 'born' rather than 'created'. Believe me, for anyone who's stared at a PC screen for hours on end willing the ideas to flow, the answer to that one is just as important.

So, let's get right into it. Just where do ideas come from? It seems that, for some writers at least, the act of creation is almost unconscious, although one that takes a lot of hard work to bash into final shape. This from Ian Irvine, now working on *Chimaera*, the culmination of his four-book 'Well of Echoes' series:

After finishing 'The View From The Mirror Quartet' (which I spent 12 years on), I wanted to get right away from the world of Karan, Llian and Co, and I also wanted to write a slightly harder-edged fantasy. So I decided to set the new series two hundred years into the future, in a Santhenar greatly changed as a consequence of what happened at the end of *The Way Between The Worlds*. I did a few pages of planning of a dark world where the entire society is regimented for just one thing: survival in the endless war against the winged lyrix, then began writing the story.

The world is run by the Machiavellian scrutators and everyone (even children) have their place and their work. Men who can't contribute in any other way go to the front lines to be killed in the war, women to the breeding factories to replace the dead, for the population is falling. Unfortunately, the war is becoming a kind of magical



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arms race, with every new device produced by humanity's manufactories being topped by the flesh-forming creations of the enemy. Something's got to give, and that something will occur in *Chimaera*.

And basically, that's as much as I knew before I began 'The Well of Echoes'. The ideas came as I was writing the story. I dare say it's not helpful to say so (especially since SFX have just described me as 'arguably the most inventive fantasy author to emerge in the last few years') but essentially I make it up as I go along, then whip it into shape in many, many redrafts.

My problem isn't in getting new story ideas. Ideas are everywhere. I get a new story idea every time I read the paper, and dozens from *Scientific American* or any of the other magazines and non-fiction books I read regularly. My problem is that I have too many ideas and want to put them all in, which makes the story more complex than it needs to be unless they're ruthlessly pruned out again.

If you harbour aspirations to be the next Asimov or Tolkien, Ian's inventiveness could be amazingly off-putting, particularly if every idea takes a gallon of your blood, sweat and tears to bring into the world. But let's take a moment to analyse. The last paragraph of Ian's response is very revealing. Somewhere along the track, possibly as a result of his scientific training, Ian's acquired a mindset which, by now instinctively, analyses almost everything he sees, reads, and experiences and extrapolates it into a story idea or a plot point. While for Ian this may appear to happen almost unconsciously, I firmly believe you can train yourself with conscious effort to use your daily experience as fodder for your writing. It's this mindset that is important in unlocking your creative potential.

Some writers approach this creative mindset by consciously challenging themselves, setting themselves a problem to solve through their writing. Chuck McKenzie, co-editor of *Australien Absurdities*, writes:

Currently I'm working on a piece which (hopefully) puts a very nasty supernatural spin on the story of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. The central idea — as with many of my stories — was generated simply by my wanting to see if I could write a story which used a familiar SF theme — in this case, the old Go-Back-In-Time-To-Witness-The-Crucifixion theme — with a unique slant to it.

For others, the creative spark is 'hijacked' and used to serve the conscious concerns of the individual, their interests, likes, and (even) deeply held beliefs. Sophie Masson is currently working on two fantasy novels for the YA/adult market:

One is called *Snow, Fire, Sword*, and is a fantasy set in modern times, in a place rather like Java; the other is called *Malvolio's Revenge* and is set in New Orleans about 1911.

The central idea for *Snow, Fire, Sword*, is my great concern about what is happening to traditional culture and beliefs in Java, which is under onslaught both from materialism/urbanisation, and Islamic fundamentalism. I have changed names, etc. to make it more of a parallel world, but in essence that's what's at the basis. As I was born in Java (but of French parents) I feel quite strongly about it, but also do not want to write polemics. This is going to be a very unusual fantasy, mixing modern realities with Javanese mythology and magic!

Malvolio's Revenge was inspired by two things — my great love of Shakespeare's play *Twelfth Night* and interest in the strange character of Malvolio, and how in the Victorian era, he was seen as the play's central character (they sometimes changed the name of the play to *Malvolio*). Also, I was inspired by a visit in 2001 to New Orleans and Louisiana, and I love jazz: when I found out that the festivities which end in the famous Mardi Gras in New



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Orleans begin with *Twelfth Night*, January 6, then the connection was made! Yet another inspiration comes from one of my favourite novels, the 19th century French swashbuckling romance/adventure *Capitaine Fracasse* by Theophile Gautier. This novel will be a lot of fun, full of sly jokes, swashbuckling adventure, mystery and pratfalls! It's my third Shakespearean fantasy—the other two being the Aurealis Awards-listed *Cold Iron* (1998) and *The Tempestuous Voyage of Hopewell Shakespeare* (to be published in 2003 in the UK).

Fantasy author Juliet Marillier is another example of this type of approach:

I'm writing a story about leadership: what are the qualities of character that make a true leader, and what is the personal cost of undertaking such a role? I think the idea for the book started with a look at the Arthurian legend and why it has been so enduring. The idea has a lot to do with current or recent events, too — for instance, Xanana Gusmao's changing role in East Timor over the last 25 years or so, and the differences in style, character and credibility of various US presidents... The idea also developed through my own previous writing, as I've included styles of leadership as a theme in my last two books.

Sean Williams casts a slightly different light on the question again. Sean is the most prolific author working in Australia today. Despite the fact that he is so busy, he still finds time to do a lot of reading and thinking (and — occasionally — sleeping), and this practice serves his creative muscle well, as the following demonstrates:

This week I'm working (in one way or another) on six novels in three different universes. I'll try to keep it brief. Book #1 is *The Crooked Letter*, a prequel to my fantasy trilogy, the 'Books of the Change'. Books #2–4 are the sequel trilogy, the 'Books of the Cataclysm'. Book #5 is *Widow of Opportunity*, a standalone SF novel. Book #6 is *Force Heretic 2: Refugee*, the second book in my trilogy in the 'Star Wars: New Jedi Order' series.

As you'll see, there are no easy answers to the question of where the central ideas for the stories come from. It's not easy even pinpointing what the central idea is, exactly...

Ideas for Book #1 came from readings in biology and ecology, and the question of where the soul (if it existed) might fit into an ecosystem (i.e. what would prey on it). They also developed out of wondering about the psychic connection that some identical twins seem to have, whether they know each other or not. They also emerged from my 'spare time' readings on theology and the like.

Ideas for Books #2–4 arose out of the 'Books of the Change', which in turn came from a dream that juxtaposed fantasy-styled magic with a seaside town in SA that I more or less grew up in. Many of the locations were inspired by other real-life places in the outback. Many of the creatures in both series and the prequel stem from my wonderings on artificial intelligence and immortality.

The beginning of Book #5 (which started life as a novella, 'The Perfect Gun') was inspired by my trip to LA in 1993. The idea of a PI in a futuristic city was in turn inspired by film noir movies dating back to *Bladerunner* (and further back still), but this novel takes a lot of material from the history of the entire 20th century as well. The backstory dips deeply into my interest in post-humanity.

Book #6 was inspired by the love of *Star Wars*, that encouraged me to write in this genre — and the money, of course. ;) To me, there is no one single source of ideas. Sometimes they come out of nowhere. Sometimes they can be teased out of research. Sometimes they can be plain forced out. It all comes down to practice, which I guess might explain why I have so many of them at the moment. Touch wood!



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Certainly the practice of creation seems to beget creation. Stray thoughts, dreams, idle musings become the fuel for the creative engine once it is 'well-oiled'. Trudi Canavan, fresh from concluding her successful 'Black Magician' trilogy, is now deep into planning her next fantasy cycle which had its beginnings in idle 'wool-gathering':

The idea for this story has been sitting in the back of my mind for 17 or 18 years. I was always intrigued by the Greek and Roman gods, who behaved like humans, succumbing to love, desire, hate and jealousy. I'd wonder what the world would be like if gods like these were real. Not very pleasant, I decided. Particularly if you didn't want to obey or worship them. So I invented a world with its own pantheon of gods, and a character who at first serves the gods, then begins to question everything: how they govern humanity, whether beings that act on emotions like jealousy and hate should impose their will on others, and if it was right for the gods to play games with people for their own entertainment.

Of course the thoughts and connections that generate a creative idea can be tangential rather than linear and logical, provoking an unexpected firing or synapses that (possibly) have more to do with the architecture of the individual mind than with any kind of learned habit. Perhaps in this kind of creative experience it is more a case of the writer being born rather than being taught. Kate Forsyth is now working on a new series of 'Eileanan' books, set some 16 years after *The Fathomless Caves*:

The initial idea for the book I have just finished writing, *Full Fathom Five*, came to me while half-drowsing on a beach years and years ago. I saw in my mind's eye a young man and woman standing on a hillside in a strong red light, looking down on a house. I got a strong impression of grief and horror, and the words, 'O my father!' I thought perhaps the house was burning. Where did this image come from? I don't know. I didn't summon it. I don't remember what I was thinking about before it came. This is part of the mystery of creation.

The book I am now working on is still in that fluid, inchoate stage where I don't really know what I'm writing about. It began with a number of quickly scribbled notes I found in my notebooks. They were not together but scattered through a number of different notebooks. The first read 'black winged horse?' Another read 'Acantha — thorny'. I often write down names that catch my interest somehow. Names are very important to me, and often a character will not come alive for me until I've found the right name for them. While looking for names for previous characters, this one snagged my imagination and so I wrote it down. It still snags my imagination. In yet another notebook I found a list of untied narrative threads—things which happened in the books that are not explained or tied up—or which could have some greater meaning that I have not yet discovered. Most of these were tied up by the end. A few were not. In the first book, for example, my winged prince disguised as a hunchback says he had been followed by a raven for many miles after he went to the Tower of Ravens in Ravenshaw. In my list, there is simply the one word, 'raven', and a question mark.

For some reason, these three scribbled notes together struck a chord. I began to daydream about the fabled black winged horse of Ravenshaw, mentioned once or twice in the 'Witches of Eileanan' series, and about a girl who might tame it. Because I already had her name, her personality quickly came alive for me. From character comes plot, as surely as night follows day. I began to get a feeling for the sort of story I wanted to write and then I put that together with other ideas I had jotted down in my ideas book. Two of these are going to be important, though I'm not yet fully sure how or why. One had to do with the magical roads of the Celestines, which intersect with time as well as space. The other has to do with the ramifications of the decision to betroth the young cousins Donnacan and Bronwyn at the



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end of the Witches series. By the time they are old enough to marry, how would they feel about each other and their fate?

So here I have a number of elements which apart are no more than rough notes, but when put together become the supporting struts of a story. Now all I have to do is start laying the bricks and mortar...

There are some musings, however, into which it's best not to delve too deeply. Bill Congreve's latest project is one such example:

I'm working on the novel of [short story] 'The Mullet That Screwed John West', which will be called *The Mullet That Screwed Satan*. If you really want ideas about how I thought up the concept of a vampire mullet penis, I'll try to remember. (grin) Thankfully, I forget that part of it.

Self-generated musings, mental challenges, personal interests and beliefs, wide-ranging reading and consideration, errant thoughts, dreams—it would seem that any thought or experience, no matter how commonplace, can be the jumping-off point for a new and exciting tale. Creation is everywhere around us if we can only see it. Once recognised for what they are, how we choose to use these everyday gifts—or how they use us—is what makes for a bestselling novel.

For reasons of brevity, what you've read here is only a representative sampling of the responses that were kindly made. The contents of this editorial and an expanded selection of contributions from Australian speculative fiction authors can be found on our Forum page, which you can access via www.sf.org.au/aurealis. I invite you to visit the page and leave your own comments. But in the meantime, read on. There are many more examples of the creative spark to follow.

Here's to the future.

Keith

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