Ian Benke
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# Author Adam Cole On How To Create Compelling Science Fiction and Fantasy Stories

An Interview With Ian Benke

> Have favorite books and know what you like about them. If you don't have a favorite book, if you don't love reading, why are you writing? Ok, for money. Fine…you still need to know how the best-selling authors succeeded as writers. You can take a course or watch a YouTube video on "writer's essentials," but if you really want to internalize good writing habits, you'll have to do more than just check things off a list. You have to write your book in a way that makes you love it, and to do that, you'll need to know what you love.

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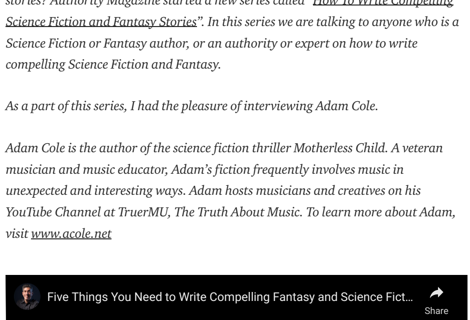
*Science Fiction and Fantasy are hugely popular genres. What does it take for a writer today, to write compelling and successful Science Fiction and Fantasy stories? Authority Magazine started a new series called "How To Write Compelling Science Fiction and Fantasy Stories". In this series we are talking to anyone who is a Science Fiction or Fantasy author, or an authority or expert on how to write compelling Science Fiction and Fantasy.*

*As a part of this series, I had the pleasure of interviewing Adam Cole.*

*Adam Cole is the author of the science fiction thriller Motherless Child. A veteran musician and music educator, Adam's fiction frequently involves music in unexpected and interesting ways. Adam hosts musicians and creatives on his YouTube Channel at TruerMU, The Truth About Music. To learn more about Adam, visit www.acole.net*

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**Thank you so much for joining us in this interview series! Before we dive into the main focus of our interview, our readers would love to "get to know you" a bit better. Can you share a story about what first drew you to writing over other forms of storytelling?**

I've been writing since I was six. It's in my blood. I started writing my first novel almost as soon as I could pick up a pencil. Of course, I didn't finish writing a novel until I was a lot older! I liked writing because I thought, when I was young, that I could instantly realize anything that came into my head, as opposed to drawing where I'd have these great ideas but couldn't get them down on paper. I later came to realize I was going to have to learn a lot more about writing before I could get anyone to actually read what I'd written.

**You are a successful author. Which three character traits do you think were most instrumental to your success? Can you please share a story or example for each?**

The first is persistence. I took 17 years to write Motherless Child, through three complete published versions and many dozens of drafts. I couldn't let it go until I was satisfied I'd written the book I set out to write.

The second is confidence. I have faith in my abilities. When I write, I usually like what comes out, even if I know it's going to need a lot of work to get it ready for an audience. I have an essential belief in the quality of my ideas and I'm willing to work as long as it takes to make my visions reality.

The third is an ability to grow. I've had to learn so much over the years, from how to write a short-story to how to get publicity, from paths to traditional publishers to self-publishing rules of the road. I'm still learning more now than I ever thought possible, and I enjoy that growth.

**Can you tell us a bit about the interesting or exciting projects you are working on or wish to create? What are your goals for these projects?**

I'm currently on the third book of a planned seven-book series called Noit-Celf about a girl named Nyla with prodigious musical abilities who finds herself in a world that needs her. She is different in appearance from most people in the world and can't, or won't remember how she got there. She makes her way through challenges, both external and internal, with the aid of an emotionally clumsy fighter, a talking sword with a bad attitude, and two characters named Chere and Sherluck who both occupy the same body at different times.

**Wonderful. Let's now shift to the main focus of our interview. Let's begin with a basic definition so that all of us are on the same page. How do you define sci-fi or fantasy? How is it different from speculative fiction?**

Speculative fiction is the larger category in which science-fiction and fantasy live. I believe it was Phillip Dick that said that an ordinary book has the author saying, "What if…" and speculative fiction has the author saying, "OH MY GOD! WHAT IF — -" The questions speculative fiction asks, answered by the lives of the characters in them, may be radically different from anything anyone ever asked before, and in some cases may pose questions we didn't even know we needed to ask.

**It seems that despite countless changes in media and communication technologies, novels and written fiction always survive, and as the rate of change increases with technology, written sci-fi becomes more popular. Why do you think that is?**

Science-fiction hits people in a lot of different places. It can be fun escapism for some, probing and thoughtful for others. Right now our world is so strange, and it's changing so fast, that we're living in a science-fiction scenario. Unlike a good book, we don't have any guarantees about how our story will end. Good science-fiction stories provide us with adventure, but also with that resolution we so very much wish we had in our lives.

**In your opinion, what are the benefits to reading sci-fi, and how do they compare to watching sci-fi on film and television?**

I think you're actually asking about the benefits of reading. It's an active way of taking in a story, where the audience are forced to complete the picture in their heads — provide images of the scenery, the sounds of the characters' voices, and the intimacy of this bond between reader and writer creates a compelling experience that transports us. A good movie or tv show is immersive, but because so much is done for you, because it's not really a one-to-one experience, it's less intimate, less intense, and the rewards are often smaller.

Of course, film and television has developed over the last forty years so that it can show anything we can imagine. What's missing, though, is the act of imagining on our part. By actively imagining we become part of the telling of the story to some extent, and we are connected to the characters in a much more intimate way.

There's one other astounding thing about fiction, and it's even more pronounced in graphic novels. When you watch a movie or TV show, no matter how good it is, you're always watching actors, so there's an implicit limit in the potential believability…the actors are pretending, and we always know they are. When you're reading a book, the characters in that book are really doing what they're described as doing in the world of the novel, so if the writing is sufficiently good, those characters can live and become real in a way that movie characters can never quite be.

**What authors and artists, dead or alive, inspired you to write?**

Ray Bradbury was the first writer who made me think, "Yeah! This is what I want to do." Then in 7th grade I read Steven R. Donaldson's Chronicles of Thomas Covenant and I thought, "This is how I want to do it." Ursula Le Guin, Madeleine L'Engle, C.S. Lewis, Michael Moorcock, they all shook me to the core at one point or another. Of course, Tolkein and the Lord of the Rings was ever-present in the background and seeped into all aspects of my life as a writer, but I had difficulties with my reading abilities as a teenager and really didn't find my way into those books until I was much older.

**If you could ask your favourite Science Fiction and Fantasy author a question, what would it be?**

Ha ha! I'd say, "Would you please read my book?"

**We'd like to learn more about your writing. How would you describe yourself as an author? Can you please share a specific passage that you think exemplifies your style?**

I am an English Major and lover of serious literature who writes speculative fiction. Not magical realism, not literature with fantastic elements in it, just fantasy and science fiction. And I've always seen it as my mission to take the best of what literature offers and bring it into fantasy and science fiction: real characters, real dilemmas, genuine transformations. With each book I want to see if it's possible to do in a fantasy or science-fiction book what Dickens or Thomas Hardy or Faulkner did while still maintaining a genuine speculative-fiction environment.

Here's a passage from a story in my collection Seven Ways The World Can End

She was singing in the voice of a thousand singers, and she was singing of such sorrow, of the end of things. She was portly, about forty inches around her waist. Her hands were folded at her navel. She was draped in delicate gauze wrappings that wafted in the breeze coming back to her from her own singing. Her hair seemed of the deepest black, red where the light came through it, blond where the light bounced back from it. Upon her head was a huge helmet with horns that extended outward like stag's antlers. Her face was angelic and wistful, and she sang like she was singing to the entire world, like the entire world was a huge personage that stood right before her, and listened, and nodded with each phrase.

Latifo recognized her instantly. He knew her with a memory encoded in his genetic material, captured in his soul's resonant pattern. He knew without being able to put it into words, who she was, what she was doing, why she was here. He knew as everyone who stood upon that earth on that day knew.

"Please," he said to her, hardly hearing his own voice through the ever-increasing sound of that beautiful music. She did not respond to him. She sang ever more to that invisible person, the great personage who stood right before her, and nodded, and listened.

"Please," he said again. "I'm sorry! I see it now!" But if she understood him, she made no sign. The music had grown to a different place, now. Its drama had sent it along the chute, a turn towards a climactic slope. He who knew so little about music could feel it in his bones, could sense the shape of that song, could foresee its ending.

"If I could just have a little more time," he begged, tears streaming down his cheeks. "I didn't really live!"

Her voice grew more strident with the force of the song, but she did not strain; rather, she grew loud, so loud in fact that Latifo could no longer hear himself protesting to her, only feel himself calling to her, feel his own voice vibrating within his chest, his lips making the words, asking for another chance, another day, another minute.

The music reached its peak. The woman, rapt in the act of making a perfect gesture, flushed with exuberance and gave a high note, born on the last breath she would need to take. That note sailed high upon the skies and it tore down the buildings, it unmade the earth, it sent all the little souls back to their maker.

**Based on your own experience and success, what are the "Five Things You Need To Write Compelling Science Fiction and Fantasy Stories?" If you can, please share a story or example for each.**

1. Finish the first draft. As Anne Lamott says, "Nobody reads your first draft." In other words, don't let anyone read it. That way you can write the stupid thing and get it done without freaking out. Because you have to have a finished something, even if it's a crappy mess, to move on to the next stage and eventually complete your book. There's an infinite amount of difference between the writer who's "still working" on that first draft and the writer who has seventeen more drafts to go. The first is hampered by insecurity, and the second just has a lot of work to do!
2. Know the three ways your book can excel. It can excel in ideas, characters or plot. Any book worth its salt should probably excel in two of those ways and it'll be a great experience for the reader. Get all three and you've got a "Dune" on your hands. If your book just has one, it'll be a lot harder to stand out from the crowd and win an audience.
3. Have favorite books and know what you like about them. If you don't have a favorite book, if you don't love reading, why are you writing? Ok, for money. Fine…you still need to know how the best-selling authors succeeded as writers. You can take a course or watch a YouTube video on "writer's essentials," but if you really want to internalize good writing habits, you'll have to do more than just check things off a list. You have to write your book in a way that makes you love it, and to do that, you'll need to know what you love.
4. Notice something in the world that you love and hate and put it in your creation. George Orwell came up with his most famous book, 1984, by moving the numbers in the year 1948. It seems like a book about a nightmarish future, but it's actually about the world he was living in at the time, just disguised and exaggerated. I did the same thing for Motherless Child: Noticed some things about my world like corporate culture, the definitive split between races in America, radical climate events, and I took them to the extreme for my world. You can do this in Fantasy too, creating a conflict between imaginary tribes of creatures or having characters vie against forces seemingly beyond their control…sound familiar?
5. Know how to parse feedback. Just because someone put your book down at page 3 doesn't mean your book is bad. Just because someone said your book is brilliant doesn't mean it will be a bestseller. Just because an editor or creative writing teacher told you your ideas are feeble doesn't mean you should give up. As a general rule of thumb, I'd suggest that if everyone says something different about your book, that can tell you who likes it and where you should be putting your energy as a writer and a marketer. If everyone says the same thing about your book, then what they're saying is probably true, no matter how hurtful it is, and you'll need to take a hard look at yourself to see why you're not seeing it too. Ultimately, learning what to do with suggestions, deciding which ones are valid for you, and which ones are just plain valid, is one of the most valuable skills you can develop as a writer in a world which doesn't care about your process, only what you can do for them today.

**We are very blessed that some of the biggest names in Entertainment, Business, VC funding, and Sports read this column. Is there a person in the world, or in the US, with whom you would love to have a private breakfast or lunch, and why? He or she might just see this, especially if we both tag them :-)**

One of the best books I read in the last ten years was Michael Chabon's The Yiiddush Policeman's Union. It'd be a real treat to get to tell him in person how much I thought of that book.

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