Science Fiction Writing at Length

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In this bold new age of literary experiment and scientific breakthrough, how do the old rules apply? In science fiction the answer requires some knowledge of the field itself.

Science fiction is an interesting literary phenomenon not only because it has evolved rapidly through a great number of forms during the past 60 years⁠—space opera, the “hard” sf tale, social sf, experimental sf, a fusion of all of the above⁠—but because every one of these forms is itself alive and well today. Fashions come and go. New scientific gimmickry may come into prominence and be overworked, the social focus may shift from the middle or upper class of a hypothetical society to its underside. The introspective may for a time become more fashionable an emphasis than the external. But science fiction has grown to the point at which it can support all of these categories today, so that a writer need not indulge in archaeology to find good examples of any sort of science fiction story told in any fashion. And all of them are still fair game for series development. Writers of science fiction should be aware of the variety of forms available, and, in considering a possible series, should select the type closest to their interests and abilities.

The sequel, the trilogy, the series, or whatever represents a continuation of a story from one novel to another⁠—all of these have become particularly prominent in science fiction in recent years. They have come into being for a variety of reasons, in a variety of forms, and represent a mixed bag of results.

First, it should be noted that this is not a new phenomenon. For an interesting, well-written story as well as a reasonably authentic picture of the British publishing scene of over a century ago, I recommend George Gissing’s New Grub Street, a novel by a man intimately acquainted with the Victorian marketplace, where the “three-volume novel” was the publisher’s mainstay. Readers who enjoy a certain group of characters are likely to come back for more of the same. And with a series, the appearance of each successive volume gives a boost to the sales of the previous novels. So there is a definite commercial incentive for their production.

But not all series were originally intended as series. Often, an author will write a novel that sells well beyond expectation and leaves a sufficient number of characters alive at its conclusion for an editor to see future possibilities and suggest, “Couldn’t you do something more with these people/that idea/this place?”

But my longest series⁠—novels dealing with Amber and its royal family⁠—came about in a somewhat different manner from this. When I began to write the first novel in that series, Nine Princes in Amber, I had no idea where it was headed. There was actually a point at which I thought it would be a single book. I forget where I was in its telling when I realized that I had more story than I’d at first thought, and that a sequel would probably be required for its completion. So a series was born. When the second volume failed to resolve things, I decided simply to keep going till I came to the end. And it took five volumes to do it.

With my Dilvish series, on the other hand, I intentionally created a situation from which I could generate fresh stories whenever the need arose. I did this so I would never be caught short of material if I needed to produce a story in a hurry.

The stories of my nameless detective, collected in My Name Is Legion, came about in a similar fashion.

My novel Madwand was written at editorial request because its predecessor, Changeling, had been well received.

These are all valid means, all valid ways of going about the business. Valid, because they worked.

I have been told that the difference between a series and a serial lies in the serial’s being a single, continued story, carried out through a number of volumes⁠—as I did with Amber⁠—whereas a series is tied together by continuing characters or a common setting, but generally it possesses brand-new plots for each successive story. This is often the case in the mystery field. It is certainly a consideration in plotting. Are you setting out to write, say, a trilogy, requiring you to conceive and execute a big, three-part story with appropriate build-up and climax for each part? Or are you attempting to create characters sufficiently interesting that there may be an indefinite demand for their adventures?

Both require that build-up and a climax in each volume⁠—the rhythm of the novel⁠—but the serial needs an overall crescendo as well. The most common distinction between serial and series, however, lies in characterization. Characters are supposed to develop, or at least change, in a story. If they’re pretty much the same coming out as going in, the entire action seems, in a sense, wasted. In a series, though, you don’t want the characters to change too much unless you’re willing to risk losing those readers who liked them just as they were in the first place and only want more of the same. In its worst form, such a story represents comic-book-type heroes who revert to precisely the same situation and attitude after each adventure. There are tricks, though, for providing excitement and maintaining interest in the series without creating such a blatant flatness of character. Sherlock Holmes, for example, remained pretty much the same throughout his adventures, but a) he was seen through the eyes of another (Dr. Watson), one who was constantly amazed by his intellectual prowess and who talked about it at length; b) the magician’s trick of misdirection drew part of the reader’s attention from the protagonist to the puzzle that he faced; and c) there was a process of “slow revelation,” allowing the reader a few new tidbits about the protagonist every now and then. These are all useful tricks to keep in mind so a continuing character won’t seem too flat through a long series of tales.

Whenever we’re talking of fiction at length, another practical consideration involves the amount of material to be used. If we’re thinking in terms of a quarter-million-word story, rather than one of 85,000 words, how are we to maintain the pace and hold reader interest while achieving the length, without “padding”? The answer is in the second step of plotting.

After the writer has worked out what is to happen in a story, he must consider how it is to be told. Using the point of view of a single character is rewarding in that it provides constant opportunity for characterization in depth; on the other hand, it is often inappropriate when dealing with a “broad canvas” story. A writer might consider using third-person viewpoint, with subplots featuring a number of point-of-view characters, maintaining suspense by separating these characters and then following and departing from them at crucial moments⁠—in effect, telling several stories, a piece at a time, all of them fitting together into the greater whole. William Gibson’s Mona Lisa Overdrive is an excellent example of this technique, as it is when used by writers as diverse as J. R. R. Tolkien and Edgar Rice Burroughs. This presupposes a single, long story spaced out over a number of books.

Another method, found in the mystery field, is to use the same character in a sequence of totally different stories, as I did with my futuristic detective in My Name Is Legion. I could still bring him back⁠—same character, same world, same methods of operation⁠—in a new story which could stand independent of the earlier ones. Unlike Dilvish, there was not a continuing thread, a kind of “overstory” lurking in the background⁠—one which finally got told in a novel (i.e., The Changing Land ). In such a case, it is easier to find some new wine with which to fill such a bottle than to nurture a fresh grape crop. Knowing when to quit may well be the hardest part of such an enterprise.

Once an entertainment ceases to be fun, you should stop. I’ve seen too many good stories dragged out beyond the point of no return, just for the sales. Don’t do it. There are plenty more stories waiting to be written in the place where that first, good impulse arose. If that creative impulse isn’t there, don’t be persuaded to force it. Go write something new and different.