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# J.R. Johnson On How To Create Compelling Science Fiction and Fantasy Stories



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A good “what if”? Is magic real, is vampirism just another communicable disease, did aliens give us faster-than-light engines? Who wins in this new world, who loses, and with what consequences? Whatever

the twist, it should have enough impact to help drive the story's conflict and change.

**S**cience 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 J.R. Johnson. J.R. Johnson is a future historian, geographer of the imaginary, social engineer and occasional mad scientist. She grew up in the folded Appalachian hills where she learned to love Fall, blueberries straight from the bush, and the stream beneath the willows near her house. The fact that Fall is inevitably followed by Winter, that picking berries meant crossing paths with bears, and that the stream was laced with dioxins may also have had some impact on her outlook. She holds a Ph.D. (Urban Studies & Planning), an M.S. (Geography) and a B.A. (History). Her work has appeared in Writers of the Future, Triangulation: Energy, Nature: Futures, and other publications.*

**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?**

**H**ello, and thank you for having me. Why writing? Books formed the scaffold of my childhood. My family have always been readers, and my parents didn't want a television in the house, so the die was cast early. I started reading young and never stopped, and was fortunate in that my father had a good collection of science fiction and fantasy books. That's how I got started with speculative fiction. I loved it,

and when you love reading a genre it's a short step to wanting to write it. At least it was for me.

**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?**

1. *Persistence*: I hate to be cliché about this but you cannot underestimate the power of stubborn determination. Starting out as a writer is hard, largely because you are essentially writing into a void. Often your only feedback is a form rejection, which is not very helpful at all. Keep going! Even the stories that don't work are a necessary step to developing your own voice. I don't know how many rejections I had before my first acceptance, but it was a lot. On the plus side, I started this process hating rejection, but now? It doesn't bother me at all.

2. *Sparkle*: Enthusiasm helps a lot, and here I'm talking about both writing and reading. It's hard to be a good writer if you don't read. You need to know how it's done, and how it's done well, but you also need to understand the field, who else is out there, and what is changing. (As an example, try reading a book you loved as a kid. Odds are, the language, construction and tone are all a bit different than a more recent story. Even classics that age well can feel a little out of sync, like a movie from the 1950s. "Show me your hands, Mister, or else! I'm in charge, see?"). And yes, there will be times when you have had enough of writing. That's fine. Use that time to read and remember why you enjoy stories in the first place. I have a few authors that I return to again and again, like comfort food for the mind.

3. *Chill*: Try not to worry about who is doing better than you, who just published what, or who has been nominated for Prize X, Y or Z. Unless that motivates you, of course! If you want it and you work for it, you will find your audience. There are many writers in the world, true, but there are also many, many readers. No matter what approach you take, it helps to remember that you are running your own race.

**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?**

One problem with being a writer is that there are always more projects than time. That said, I've been fortunate enough to get some really positive feedback on my *Writers of*

*the Future* story, most of which end with “When is the book coming out?” While I originally conceived of the story as a prequel to a larger universe, I haven’t written it yet! So that’s on my plate. Bigger picture, I have a mental image of my contributions to the world of interesting and varied books (I literally see this in my mind; it is a magic library and it is awesome). I’d like to make that happen.

**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?**

To be honest, I tend to swirl these categories together into a tasty milkshake of fun, but here goes. To me, science fiction involves extensions of technology and contexts that don’t exist, yet. So, faster than light travel, antigravity, phasers, colonies on other planets, that sort of thing. We don’t know how to do these things but it’s not crazy to think that they may be within the realm of possibility... some day. Fantasy deals with elements that *can’t* exist, at least not within our current scientific framework. Werewolves, magic wands, elves, dragons, that sort of thing. Then there’s magical realism and other approaches that put literary realism first, then add a speculative twist. I’m not a purist by any means; I enjoy them all.

**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?**

Part of the popularity of science fiction may be *because* of those changes. There have been so much technological and societal progress in such a short period of time that humanity is at once overwhelmed and excited. Literature has always been a way for readers to insert themselves into a fictional scenario and explore the resulting challenges and solutions. How do we deal with what is happening to us now? What does the future look like, and how do we get there? What positive goals can we aim for and what negative outcomes should we try to avoid?

**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 love the written word; it's the format I've found to be most effective at building new worlds. That said, when it comes to entertainment I'm also a big believer in finding what works for you. E-books and audiobooks can also be great ways to enjoy fiction. Regardless of your preference, each of these formats engages you in ways that let you actively translate story ideas into a version that's uniquely your own.

I also enjoy sci-fi movies and TV shows, but they are a bit of a different beast. I find that there's less of a participatory aspect to sci-fi experienced this way. Some days that's great, I don't need to imagine every element of a spaceship to enjoy it, and I'm happy to let the set designers build it for me so we can get into the story. I think of video games as an intermediate experience between reading and watching. The visuals and broad storyline are constructed for you, but the act of both playing through the story and choosing the details of your path can make games more involving. (Yes, I had a little *World of Warcraft* problem once upon a time, but I'm better now, thanks.)

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

That's a great question, and the answer tends to shift depending on my current genre and goals. My tastes have also changed along the way, but my particular path to writing started with authors like Maurice Sendak, J.R.R. Tolkien, Anne McCaffrey, Robert Heinlein, Ray Bradbury, Ursula Le Guin and Douglas Adams. Now my list also includes writers like Jim Butcher, Naomi Novik, James S.A. Corey, Patrick Rothfuss, Nnedi Okorafor, Neil Gaiman, Ilona Andrews, John Scalzi, Hank Green, Ann Leckie, Martha Wells and Justin Cronin, to name just a few! For me, the books that stand out in this regard are the ones that trigger an internal writer's response: "How did they do this? Hang on, I think I could do this." And then you get to work.

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

What gives you hope, and how do you translate that into your work?

**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 know I'm not alone in having a variety of approaches to writing, but I accomplish the most when I'm actively having fun. This excerpt from "Piracy for Beginners," published

in *Writers of the Future Volume 39*, captures a lot of what I enjoy about writing.

*Logline: With her spaceship at the wrong end of a pirate's guns, a former war hero must face down her enemies, and demons, to save Earth's last best chance for peace.*

A man, dressed in black with the build of a career spacer, wielded a length of pipe and a snarl. He came at me again but I skipped out of the way.

Right into his friend's fist.

Stars flared and my eyes watered. If there were more than two I was screwed, I couldn't see a thing. I stumbled back against a column and blinked hard, trying to clear my vision.

The second man was lean and twitchy, shaking his hand like he didn't know how to throw a punch. No pipe for him, just a tool belt and a jumpsuit that made him look like any other port worker. The rest of the concourse was empty.

I tasted iron on my lips, wrinkled my nose at the men's acrid sweat. Where the hell were the port guards? I reconsidered as soon as the thought appeared. Better to be the only one at risk.

"We're out of time, finish her," the second man said. He looked nervous, but not about me.

His mistake.

Thug Number One hefted the pipe and came at me straight. Maybe he was strong enough to bull through most violent situations.

Not me. As a woman almost always outweighed by her opponents, I'd learned to use guile.

I huddled against the concrete support, legs braced, shaking my head like I was still dazed. Like I didn't see Thug Number One with his pipe and bad attitude. I added a whimper. For effect, you understand.

The idiot bought it.

## Based on your own experience and success, what are the “Five Things You Need To Write Compelling Science Fiction and Fantasy Stories?”

1. A good “what if”? Is magic real, is vampirism just another communicable disease, did aliens give us faster-than-light engines? Who wins in this new world, who loses, and with what consequences? Whatever the twist, it should have enough impact to help drive the story’s conflict and change.
2. A sympathetic character. I recently read a story with a great premise but almost gave up on it because the main characters were all awful. They eventually went through the expected transition and became people I could root for, but it was a near thing. Characters don’t have to be nice but they do have to be people readers want to spend time with, or they will find another story.
3. An interesting setting. This is your story’s playground. Ground your readers by making them feel the sand between their toes, jump at a black widow spider on the water fountain, and hear the soft sounds of a jazz quartet in the vampire bar around the corner.
4. A worthy problem. If the central conflict isn’t vitally important to your character, it won’t be important to your readers.
5. A satisfying ending. Your main character needs to dig deep to solve her problems, and please, no cliffhangers!

**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 :-)**

Ooh, great question, and one with so many possible answers! This may be a slight cheat, but I’d like to take this opportunity to appreciate both Martha Wells and Ilona Andrews, who write some of my favorite mental comfort food. If you’re interested, start with *All Systems Red* (Wells) and *Magic Bites* (Andrews).

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Thank you for these excellent insights, and we greatly appreciate the time you spent. We wish you continued success.

Thanks so much for helping to support authors in particular and speculative fiction in general!

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