



## Getting in Touch with Your Inner Fan:

WRITING FOR RPG AND MEDIA TIE-INS

BY WILL McDERMOTT

Novels based on movies and television shows such as *Star Wars*, *Star Trek*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Angel*, as well as such fantasy-oriented games as *Dungeons & Dragons* and *Magic: The Gathering*, now make up a significant portion of the science fiction and fantasy (SFF) market. Just go into your local bookstore and head to the science fiction section (which is where fantasy novels still get shelved). At least one-quarter—and perhaps as much as one-half—of the shelves

dedicated to science fiction and fantasy will be filled with role-playing game (RPG) and media tie-in novels.

These books are often discussed under the umbrella term of “shared world” novels because many different authors are all writing stories in a single world using shared settings and shared characters. As such, this large market requires a large number of authors. The *Magic: The Gathering* series alone currently numbers over thirty novels. Most of these shared world novels are printed as series, so the books get shelved together under the series title. This makes it easy for readers interested in that series to find your book. And, as most novelists will tell you, this is at least ninety percent of the battle for making sales—especially for a new or up-and-coming writer. You might not have name recognition yet, but if a series is popular, even a first-time novelist can get decent sales and instant fame with a shared world novel.

But don't expect that name recognition to automatically transfer to more work and higher royalties down the line. In the minds of most SFF writers and publishers, shared world novels are still very much the Harlequin Romances of the genre. These novels are often seen as little more than pulp fiction by other SFF authors. This is ironic considering that the entire SFF genre has struggled against that label for half a century from mainstream and literary writers and publishers.

However, many well-known SFF authors got their start writing shared world novels. One of the best-known success stories in this section of the genre is R. A. Salvatore. As the story goes, Salvatore was found in the “slush” pile at TSR, then the publishers of the *Dungeons & Dragons* games and novels. He was asked to write the initial novel in a new series—*The Forgotten Realms*. Salvatore's style and characters hit a nerve in the gaming community, propelling his work to the *New York Times* bestsellers list. Salvatore has now published over thirty novels, including more than a dozen written in worlds of his own creation for such “mainstream” SFF publishers as Ace and Del Rey.

R. A. Salvatore's story is a shining light to aspiring writers who want to break into the publishing business. It is possible for an unknown writer to get a foot in the door and jumpstart a career in the RPG and media tie-in subgenre of SFF. However, there are many pitfalls to avoid along the way, and contrary to popular belief, it's not really easier to

write shared world novels—or to get published in this subgenre—than it is in the general SFF field. It's just different.

This chapter will take you through the steps to getting that first shared world novel published and discuss the unique problems you will encounter along the way. We'll talk about how to get work in the field and what to expect once you're offered a contract. We'll discuss doing research (which is just as important as when writing your own stories), and then talk about writing the story and doing the re-write.

### **WHAT WE AREN'T: SHARED WORLD V. FANFIC**

First, though, let's talk about the differences between shared world fiction and *fanfic* (or fan-written fiction). The basic difference is that shared world fiction is authorized by the *licensor* (the company that owns and controls the story), while fanfic is unauthorized. This may seem like a small difference to those fans who just want to write a *Star Trek* or *Buffy* story, but there are some consequences resulting from this distinction you should consider before writing fanfic.

First of all, fanfic does not become *canon* (official storyline history), so a fanfic author can never truly affect the destiny of any characters in the world. Of course, most fanfic writers don't care whether their story is canon. They just want to have some fun with the characters and see what might happen if Buffy and Xander ever got together (or Kirk and Spock, but that's a completely different type of fanfic altogether). However, if you want to write authorized stories that have a real impact on the storyline of your favorite show, fanfic is not the venue for you.

Plus, some licensors like to control their properties (the stories and worlds they have created) very closely. You can face legal action if you publish a story in someone else's world without permission, even if you only publish it on the Internet. Now, most licensors will simply ask you to cease publication or force you to remove the story from the website. But if you have been profiting from the sale of fiction written in a licensed world without permission, that is considered stealing and you could face serious punishments.

Of course, most fan fiction is not written to make money, so the chances of getting sued are minimal. Fanfic authors write for the simple joy of playing with their favorite characters or favorite world. The stories are posted free on fan sites or printed on copy machines and given out to friends. Realistically (and legally) you can't make any

money from writing fanfic, as you can from writing authorized, shared world fiction. In addition, fanfic rarely advances your professional career. Most fanfic is written by amateurs and lacks the polish of novels that are written by professionals. Thus, most publishers regard fanfic with a certain amount of disdain.

If you are looking to cross over to the professional, shared world market where you can actually get paid for your work, you would be wise to keep your fanfic career under wraps. Even though fanfic can be a way to practice your craft and get feedback from readers on your abilities, if you do publish some fanfic, do so anonymously or write under a pseudonym. Publishers won't count fanfic as publishing credits on your resume anyway because of its amateur status, and those publishers who do control their licenses very closely will never hire a fanfic writer for an authorized, shared world fiction project.

### **PAYING YOUR DUES: GETTING WORK**

Now that you know what we aren't, let's look at what shared world fiction really is, and how to get work in the field. Probably the main difference between shared world fiction and the rest of SFF (at least from the perspective of a potential author) is how you get published. Most, if not all, shared world novels are "works-for-hire." This means that the publisher contracts you to write the novel instead of signing a contract with you to publish a novel you've already written. Thus, while you may have some input into character creation and development, story setting, and maybe even the plot of the novel, you are still writing the publisher's story in *their* world. Therefore, you will be writing under certain constraints that authors writing in worlds of their own design generally don't have to worry about.

What this also means, though, is that the publisher owns all of the rights to the work after you deliver the final draft. As I mentioned earlier, you are writing in *their* world. You will still get paid for writing the novel and may even receive royalties after it is published, but you cannot re-sell the work later once it's out of print and you won't cash in on movie rights or other spin-off's of your work, unless compensation for those extra rights are specifically spelled out in the contract (but only established authors have the clout to pull that off). The novel belongs to the publisher once you're finished with it, and not all authors are comfortable with that type of arrangement.

Work-for-hire has its perks, though. For one thing, you know you will get paid for your work. In fact, you generally get part of your *advance* upon signing the contract. An advance is a financial sum paid in installments, usually one at the beginning and the remainder payable upon completion of the rough draft and/or the final draft. Most first-time authors spend months or years writing their novel and then spend many more months or years trying to attract a publisher before they get a single dime for all their work.

Plus, while you still have to do your homework on the world and characters to avoid making mistakes in dialogue, characterization, or setting descriptions, writing in a shared world allows you to concentrate more on plot development and writing and less on world building and research. Much of that work is already done for you. Everything you really need to know is in previous books, on the screen, or comes from the original creators of the world.

But that doesn't mean you can necessarily go from one shared world project to another with no downtime for research and no breaks between work-for-hire paychecks. Consider this kind of project as freelance work, which means that not only do you have to do the work, you have to go out and find the work. You're going to need more than the ability to write good dialogue and a love for a particular fictional world to get a job writing shared world fiction. You need both of these as well as talent, some luck, a lot of perseverance and (nowadays) an agent.

Contrary to popular belief, it's not all that easy to get your start in shared world fiction; at least, not anymore. Remember, shared world publishers are almost never going to publish *your* story. They generally have a continuing storyline and each novel has to fit into it. That means you will be writing *their* story. So how do you get their attention? Some publishers, such as Wizards of the Coast, still accept unsolicited manuscripts. Wizards has several shared world lines tied to the games they publish. These include the popular *Dragonlance* and *Forgotten Realms* novels, a series of novels tied to the *Magic: The Gathering* trading card game, and two new young adult lines—*Dragonlance: The New Adventures* and *Knights of the Silver Dragon*.

But Wizards isn't going to print *your* novel. They look through the pile of *unsolicited manuscripts* they receive looking for potential authors. Unsolicited manuscripts are any stories or novels that the

publisher did not ask to see. These go into what is called the *slush pile*, which is a stack (or many stacks) of unsolicited manuscripts that only gets read when the editor has no other work to do. Not many writers make it out of the slush pile, even though that is supposedly how Salvatore's career got started. But even Salvatore had done a lot of work refining his style, *and* he got lucky that the right editor saw his manuscript at the right time—when TSR needed an author to jumpstart a new line of novels.

But many publishers don't accept unsolicited material anymore. For example, Simon Pulse publishing—the imprint of Simon and Schuster that publishes all of their media tie-in novels—only accepts *agented* submissions. These are submissions presented to the publisher by an agent working for the author. The agent makes the contacts and sends your work to the publisher. So you need an agent to get noticed by Simon and Schuster, which makes it especially tough on authors interested in breaking into shared world fiction. Simon Pulse publishes novels for all of the following shows: *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Angel*, *Charmed*, *Star Trek*, *Warcraft*, *Terminator*, *Transformers*, *Blade*, *Battlestar Galactica*, *Resident Evil*, *Ghostbusters*, *Law and Order*, *Everwood*, *CSI*, *The Wire*, *SpongeBob SquarePants* and others.

In addition, neither Del Rey, the publishers of adult *Star Wars* novels, nor Scholastic, publishers of the *Jedi Apprentice* and *Jedi Quest* young adult novels as well as such children's media tie-in novels as *PowerPuff Girls* and *Jimmy Neutron*, accepts unsolicited submissions. This leaves the shared world field looking much like the rest of the publishing business—a tough place to break into for novice writers.

So what can you do to get noticed? As with any other fiction field in this day and age, you have to make your own breaks. Generally, you need to know someone on the inside, find an agent to represent you, or have enough name recognition in the industry that you can cut through some of the red tape. All of these require you to pay your dues. Good agents (the kind that will actually get you noticed by one of the top publishers of shared world fiction) only represent authors they believe have the stuff to make it (and make them money). Name recognition comes from getting published in other paying markets, or through strong ties to the actual RPG or media tied to the novels. And, having a contact on the inside either comes from dumb luck or—more

likely—from actually working in the industry for a decent period of time (anywhere from two to twenty years, depending on your drive).

If you are serious about writing shared world fiction, there are some options. Short fiction is a great way to hone your craft and get published in respectable outlets. Most SFF magazines still accept unsolicited manuscripts, so you can get published without an agent and then use those credentials to either get an agent or make a name for yourself that might open doors down the road.

There are many magazines out there looking for fiction. The top magazines like *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction* magazine, *Fantasy and Science Fiction* magazine and *Realms of Fantasy* will pay for your work, but they may be tougher to break into at first. Luckily, there are hundreds of smaller publications (many of which only pay in *author copies*—copies of the issue in which your story appears). The best way to find markets for your work is to buy or borrow a copy of the *Writers' Market*, which lists book and magazine editors, as well as agents, with complete details of what they are looking for, how much they pay, and how long it will take for them to respond. Here are some websites to jumpstart your search for short fiction markets.

- [www.writersmarket.com](http://www.writersmarket.com) (the online version of the Writer's Market guide)
- [gilaqueen.us](http://gilaqueen.us) (Gila Queen's Guide to Markets, which lists numerous markets)
- [www.ralan.com](http://www.ralan.com) (Ralan's Webstravaganza, which lists SF and humor book, magazine, and anthology markets)
- [www.burymman.com/scifi.html](http://www.burymman.com/scifi.html) (The Burry Man Writers Center, which lists SF and horror markets)

Look for magazines or anthologies that are publishing the type of stories you like to write. You don't want to send a sword and sorcery story to *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*. They just don't publish that type of story. The best way to find out what a magazine wants is to buy a copy and read the stories inside.

You can also look for other opportunities outside the major publishing houses. Wizards of the Coast still accepts unsolicited manuscripts, so that's one place to start. Many of the fiction writers for Wizards got their start by working on RPG products. And while

you may not be able to get an RPG freelance job through Wizards, there are magazines such as *Dragon* and *Dungeon*, and many small companies that produce d20 (D&D compatible) products out there. These magazines and small companies are always looking for capable writers to work on new products.

Some of the d20 companies are even beginning to publish fiction in their own worlds, which is another place to get your start. In addition, small press publishers often gain access to the rights for smaller or newer media properties. These small press publishers are usually less strict about submission guidelines and can be a great place to get your start. And, if that property takes off, you can rise with it as one of the original authors.

The best way to keep on top of these kinds of opportunities is to track the industry. Find some properties that interest you and watch the Internet for information about publishing opportunities for that show or game. If you're a fan of the show, you may already know where to find the information you need, and that interest will help you throughout the process. The company that produces the property is a good starting point, but often the most up to date information will be found on fan sites. It may take some digging to find the right sites, but here are a few URLs to get you started:

- [www.aicn.com](http://www.aicn.com) (Ain't-It-Cool-News—a great source for info about SFF movies and T.V. shows)
- [www.enworld.org](http://www.enworld.org) (EN World—the spot for information about D&D and d20 publishing companies)
- [www.gamingreport.com](http://www.gamingreport.com) (Gaming Report—news about the gaming industry)