

## Why Write Speculative Fiction?

*Resources for Writers from Laura Williams McCaffrey and Dean Whitlock*

### Author Discussion with Laura Williams McCaffrey and Dean Whitlock

**DW:** When I was growing up, there was science fiction and there was fantasy. I discovered them both very early on (*Tom Swift, Jr. and his Jetmarine* at age 7, *On Beyond Zebra* even earlier) and was immediately hooked. I soon noticed that the two genres often overlapped, and that some writers could easily write both (Fritz Leiber and Ursula LeGuin for example). When I was in college, someone coined the term *Speculative Fiction* to cover both genres. They do have a lot in common: both science fiction and fantasy deal with situations that do not exist. I love them for that. The escape from day-to-day reality is one of the main reasons that readers feel entertained when they read a good book, be it romance, mystery, thriller, western, or the great melting pot of imagination so unimaginatively called "mainstream". Every story depends on two ingredients: *characters* brought together in a *situation*, the classic "what-if". With speculative fiction, both the people and the what-ifs exercise the imagination far beyond the other types of fiction. Wizards, elves, alien cats, space merchants, magic, space travel, time travel, parallel worlds... I could go on for paragraphs! Do you like romance? Mystery? Politics? Heck, throw them into your F&SF what-if and they'll fit just fine. In Speculative Fiction, there are no limits.

**LWM:** Like you, I think I was immediately drawn to fantasy, magical realism, science fiction (usually

dystopias), and really any strange read because of its strangeness. I felt these kinds of books were...limitless. I still feel this way, but I don't think speculative fiction stories are fundamentally different from other kinds of stories; many depict struggles to make sense of or change oneself and one's world. To give an over-simplified example: in a fantasy story, if a girl's father is killed, she might challenge his killer to a magical duel; in a contemporary fiction story, she might insist to speak with the police detective investigating her father's murder. And yet both stories can still be about grief and rage, shock and vengeance.

So, where do you get the ideas or information you use to create the specific world for each story?

**DW:** Ideas are everywhere! The hard part is filling in all the details to make an idea a story. (Which is why we talked about characters first: they bring the idea to life.) My ideas are usually sparked by something I read or hear. The source can be anything: a novel, non-fiction, a song, a piece of news on the radio. For example, my first published short story, "The Million-Dollar Wound," came to me when I heard the song "The Band Played Waltzing Matilda," by Australian Eric Bogle. In it, a swagman who is drafted in WWI loses both legs in a battle. The next day, I heard a news report about the first successful use of a mechanical human heart. The sadness in Bogle's anti-war song and the amazing advance in life-saving technology combined in a single idea: What if you could fix any injury

imaginable? What would the generals do with the wounded? How would the soldiers feel about it? Why? More recently, I saw a performance of part of the ancient epic "Beowulf," recited in Old English. Now I'm fascinated by the Dark Ages and am working on a fantasy novel that takes a contemporary teenager there. To paraphrase the X-Files, The Ideas are Out There. Do you get the same sort of lightning strikes?

**LWM:** I do. Once I decide how to use a lightning strike, I tend to sink into something I call "researching" that is actually more like gleaning. I read to collect historical or cultural details I can use to create what I often call "a feel." For example, while writing *Water Shaper* I read Barbara Tuchman's *A Distant Mirror* twice, as well as this folklore collection/memoir called *The People of the Sea* by David Thomson. These two books definitely helped me dream up *Water Shaper's* world and story. For *Lyla's Flight*, I kept rereading Art Spiegelman's *Maus* and Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*, which inspired me to craft a world in which there's a difficult cultural and political struggle. I don't cross-read as I'm working on a novel; I only glean for one story at a time. I guess I sort of have a one-track mind...

**DW:** It's called Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder, only in writers it's a good thing! When we get hooked on an idea, we have to follow it through to its conclusion.

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## Writing Activities

**Found! – A Topic** – Flip through a newspaper or news magazine and write down the basic subject of several articles that appeal to you. Pick three of these subjects that you think would combine to make an interesting story. Write down three or four questions that will turn these ideas into a story, beginning with "What if...?"

**Superpowers, Activate** – If you could have any superpower possible -- but just one -- what superpower would you choose and why? Once you've chosen, write a story in which you discover you have this superpower. Remember, superpowers also have strict limitations or serious drawbacks; you'll have to learn how to cope with or overcome yours in your story. At your story's end, you'll likely have to become a wiser, and perhaps triumphant, wielder of your superpowers.

**Retell It** – Choose a tale: fairy tale, folktale, legend (ancient, urban, or anything in between), ghost tale, description of a UFO sighting, or another kind of fantastical tale. Invent or augment characters who participate in the tale's events. Then, using the characters you've developed, retell the tale as a short story.

## Resources for Writing Speculative Fiction

### Elementary School

- Fairy tales, folklore, and legends from around the world.
- Eileen Christelow's *What do Illustrators Do?*
- "Writing to Form" and "Comic Books" in Peggy Kaye's *Games for Writing*.

### Middle School

- "Fiddling with Fairy Tales" in Gail Carson Levine's *Writing Magic*.
- Various articles by Diana Wynne Jones on writing.  
<http://www.leemac.freemove.co.uk/articles.htm>

### High School

- Orson Scott Card's *How to Write Science Fiction and Fantasy*.
- Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*.
- Patricia C. Wrede's "Fantasy Worldbuilding Questions" at <http://www.sfw.org/2009/08/fantasy-worldbuilding-questions/>

### Adult/Advanced -- all of the above, plus:

- Section II "On Fantasy" in Eleanor Cameron's *The Seed and the Vision*.
- Ursula LeGuin's *Language of the Night: Essays on Fantasy and Science Fiction*.
- "Speculative Fiction" in *Meditations and Ascensions: Black Writers on Writing*.

## Author Bios

**Laura Williams McCaffrey** is a full-time writer and writing teacher. Her forthcoming novel is a dystopic fantasy for teens. She's the author of two other YA fantasy novels, *Water Shaper* (NYPL Books for the Teen Age list 2007) and *Alia Waking* (IRA Notable Book). Laura is on the faculty at Solstice, the low-residency MFA in Creative Writing Program at Pine Manor College. Additionally, she teaches writing at Pacem Learning Community, a learning center for homeschoolers, and is regularly a writer-in-residence at schools and writing camps.

**Dean Whitlock** is a military brat who likes to think that living in so many different places naturally drove him into a fantasy world. Now he does most of his traveling through his stories (but only for want of money and time!). He is the author of two YA novels (*Sky Carver* and *Raven*, both from Clarion Books), three handfuls of short stories, and several plays and murder mystery events. He also visits schools to read and teach whenever he can. He believes that imagination is the key difference between humans and other animals, because his students can always envision such wonderful stories, no matter what grade they're in or how much they know about commas.

For more information or resources, visit:  
<http://www.laurawilliamscaffrey.com> or  
<http://www.deanwhitlock.com>