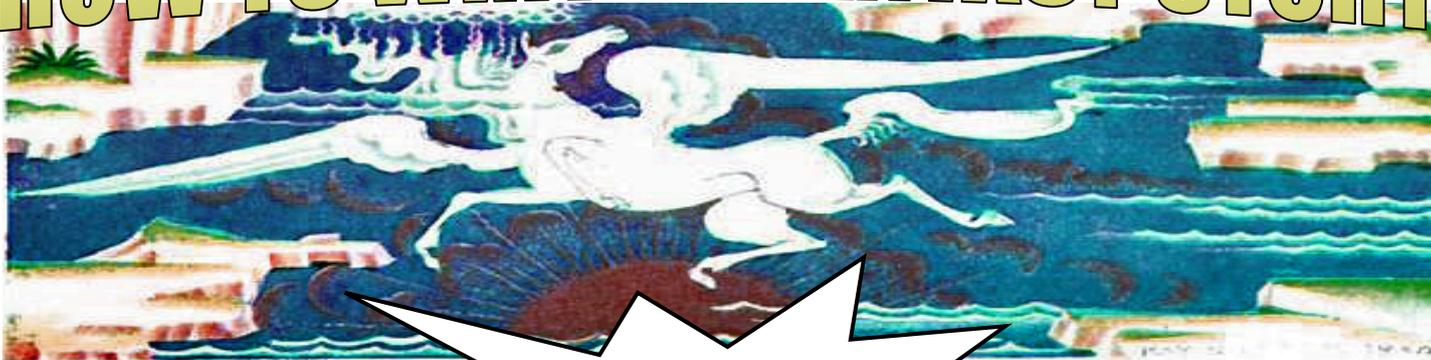# HOW TO WRITE A FANTASY STORY

From award-winning author Cliff McNish

Many people love reading and writing fantasy stories. I've written several myself, including my *Doomspell* series, which has so far sold in 21 languages worldwide. I also teach fantasy-writing in my workshops, and the same problems constantly come up. Below I've considered all my experiences, and used them to offer you five most useful tips on fantasy writing I can.

CLIFFMCNISH TIP 1 - BEGINNINGS - CHOOSING WHAT TO WRITE ABOUT

Since fantasy stories can be about anything that is different from our world, people often get overwhelmed about where to start. *Do you really have to create a whole new world*, full of weird creatures? No. If you want to do that I'm the last person to hold you back, but years of teaching fantasy writing have made me realise that you should <u>start off small.</u>

Take my advice and do this: draw the outline of our world – as a circle – on a sheet of paper. Add land and oceans. Accuracy isn't important. Then think about the land alone. Literally millions of things exist and live upon it. Animals. Trees. Buildings. Clocks. Steel. Beds. Lights. Snow. Cities. List as many things as you can in no more than 2 minutes.

Now take <u>one of those things only</u> and have your fantasy planet just like our Earth except that on your world this *one single element is exaggerated in importance.* In *Lord of the Rings* Tolkien chose rings. He gave a single ring so much power that everything revolved around it. In the *Narnian Chronicles* C. S. Lewis decided that animals would be able to talk and think like human beings. It's your turn to do what they did. Take one element about our world that interests you. Once you've chosen it, ask yourself how different everyone's life would be if that one thing was <u>much more important or precious or dangerous than on our world.</u> You'll be amazed by what you come up with. And once you've done this, use my other SHEETS to help you construct your story and develop great characters.

Illustration Kay Nielsen 'East of the Sun and West of the Moon' 1914

CM TIP 2 - MAGIC – THINK ABOUT THE RULES!

Most people read fantasy primarily for the magic and spells. But the single biggest mistake most amateur fantasy writers make is that they fail to realise that magic is believable only **if limits are placed on it.** Magic without limits means you can do anything, just wave your wand and everything's OK. Does that make for an intriguing story? Of course not. It's when you **restrict** the use of magic – or if there are dire consequences to using it – that you open up great storylines in fantasy.

Someone who understands this is J. K. Rowling. In the *Harry Potter* books the use of magic is always restricted at school to particular places and lessons. In addition, the most powerful spells are locked away in the library. They are counter-balanced by opposing spells. And your personal wand needs to be picked by an expert. It needs to be made from just the right kind of material. It needs to be balanced. You need to use it precisely. You must also practise endlessly. And if the wand is damaged, you can't just grab someone else's and make it work the same way ... so many restrictions, just on wands! But do you see? That's what makes them seem real! So, if you're writing a fantasy story about magic, enjoy coming up with the spells, but spend just as much time thinking about all the rules that define *what skills you need to use magic, the consequences of using it, the restrictions on how and where it can be used, and counter-magic.* You'll be stunned by how much it improves your story.

CM TIP 3 – FANTASY CREATURES – DESCRIPTIONS

People often have trouble coming up with descriptions for good fantasy creatures. Ogres, dragons and giants might be fine, because readers already have an idea of what they might look like, but what if you want to create something unique? How do you describe such a creature in a way that makes it feel real? Here's how. Most people primarily think *visually* – in pictures. What that means is that readers will tend to believe in your made-up creatures *if they can picture them well enough*. So you have to describe them in as clear and as detailed a way as you possibly can. That's point one. But then go further. We use *all five* of our senses. Your readers are more likely to believe in your creature if it has a *smell*. If you also tell them what it might be like to *hear and touch*, your creature will feel even more real. Here's a brief passage from Philip Pullman's Dark Materials book, *The Amber Spyglass*. Look at the way he uses all five senses to bring this grim, frightening creature to life …

'The thing was a great bird the size of a vulture, with the face of a woman. Will had seen pictures of creatures like her, and the word harpy came to mind as soon as he saw her clearly. Her face was smooth and unwrinkled, but aged beyond even the age of the witches: she had seen thousands of years pass, and the cruelty and misery of all of them had formed the hateful expression on her features. But as the travellers saw her more clearly, she became even more repulsive. Her eye-sockets were clotted with filthy slime, and the redness of her lips was caked and crusted as if she had vomited ancient blood again and again. Her matted filthy black hair hung down to her shoulders; her jagged claws gripped the stone fiercely; her powerful dark wings were folded along her back, and a drift of putrescent stink wafted from her every time she moved'.

Illustration Kay Nielsen 'East of the Sun and West of the Moon' 1914

CM TIP 4 – WORLD BUILDING

The great fantasy writers create worlds which are as absolutely believable, in every way, as our real world. Take Tolkien. In *Lord of the Rings* he's interested in making his *Middle Earth* a totally real place – so real you can almost touch it. He did that by perfecting his understanding of it first. He imagined every mountain and blade of grass. If the sun was setting on the towers of Gondor, he knew exactly which parts of nearby Mordor would be in shade. I'm not saying you have to go to Tolkien's level of detail to make things believable, but in my experience most amateur writers are lazy. True fantasy writers make their alternate worlds believable by spending a lot of time just thinking in detail about every aspect of that world – what it looks like, how people behave, what the weather is like, what the stars look like, everything. They do that before they start writing the story. If you are serious about your fantasy writing, have the patience to do the same. It will not only improve your story enormously, but it will deepen your own commitment to it. Once you develop a world fully in your mind and make it yours, that world becomes special, and you fall in love with your own creation. So: don't be lazy. Start coming up with all the things about your fantasy world that are going to fascinate people right now. And here's my most important tip of all here. Whenever something is different in your fantasy from *our* world you must think about *how and why* things are different. The reader wants to know! If you don't bother explaining the differences they won't believe your world, and pretty soon they'll stop reading.

CM TIP 5 – THE BEAUTY OF DETAIL

My last tip is this: use details to make believers of your readers. Details make things feel real. If you describe something in a way that makes it sound gritty and part of real life people tend to believe it. In *Eragon* Christopher Paulini does not make the mistake of describing Eragon's first dragon ride as a nice flight across the sky. Instead, the rough scales of Saphira's hide rub Eragon's thighs so badly that they bleed. Now *that* kind of detail feels real! Similarly, in *Harry Potter* J.K.Rowling doesn't just have her characters jump on broomsticks and fly. She makes it convincing by breaking up each broomstick activity into component parts. So first you choose your broomstick. There are different kinds. Some are fast but tricky to handle. Others are reliable but slow. This detail – and again note the restrictions! – and the limits on them make them feel more believable. Put the same level of effort into your own details and your fantasy will seem just as real.

To find out more about Cliff McNish's own award winning novels for children and young adults go to www.cliffmcnish.com