

Exegesis:

INTO THE ARCHIVES

and

Creative Thesis:

MALLORY BEST AND THE CURSE OF LUPA

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Abstract

Mallory Best and the Curse of Lupa, acts as the first novel in YA fantasy penatology which answers the question: What would happen if a teenage girl accidentally unleashed a collection of ancient and deadly curses on her town?

Exegesis: Into the Archives explores how *MBATCOL*'s function as the first book in a series influences the writing process and the considerations that had to be made throughout its creation.

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Attestation Of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements) nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or any other institution of higher learning.

Signed: _____

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EXEGESIS: INTO THE ARCHIVES

Synopsis

So ... have you ever wondered what would happen if you accidentally unleashed an ancient curse on your town? Yeah, me neither.

I never imagined that when Dad moved us to this yawn of a town, my life would become, in any way, magical. Hell, my plan was to graduate and get out: no friends, no fuss. But then a ghost started leaving me directions to a secret room hidden in the back of the library. And of course, the class know-it-all, Ace Anderson not only followed me but also managed to release the Shadow — a bloodthirsty monster that was trapped between the pages of a cursed book. I know, he's an idiot. But what's worse is the Shadow's now armed with a dozen more cursed books and determined to destroy this realm and everyone in it. It's already released *The Curse of Lupa* — a wonderful curse that, quite literally, summoned a cow-sized Hellbeast from the fiery depths of the underworld. *Joy*. So, here we are ... in the ruins of the chemistry lab watching my homework go up in smoke.

It wasn't all bad, though. I mean, how many sixteen-year-old girls can say that they've been inducted into a once invisible world of curses, beasts and blades. Or, fought a fire-breathing Hellbeast and still made it home before curfew.

But, its not over yet; the Shadow's still out there with a dozen more curses, equally as dangerous as *The Curse of Lupa*. Then there's the fact that our actions have set an ancient prophecy in motion, for which Ace and I are now key players. With intertwined fates, we must learn to fight against powerful forces and, more importantly, work together as a team. Then, maybe, with the right training and a whole lot of luck, we might just survive what is to come.

I hope.

Introduction

Since its conception, *Mallory Best and the Curse of Lupa (MBATCOL)*, was always intended to be part of a series. One that answers the question: What would happen if the creatures we read about actually came out of the books?

The *Mallory Best* series is envisioned to be an urban fantasy pentalogy written for young adult and new adult audiences, with the capacity to spawn spin-off stories within the same world. Each book is envisioned to cover a different curse, whilst maintaining the overarching battle to destroy the Shadow once and for all. In *MBATCOL*, our protagonists face *The Curse of Lupa*: a curse broadly affecting all creatures with canine DNA, from the neighbours chihuahua to a fire-breathing Hellbeast summoned from the depths of the underworld. Despite the fact that this curse will be beaten by the end of the novel, every element of *MBATCOL* was written considering how it would function in and influence the series as a whole.

First Steps First...

Before we begin, let me tell you a few facts about myself and my work.

Fact 1: I *always* start with character.

Technically *MBATCOL* was conceptualised a decade ago, but, as my notebooks full of unused ideas can attest, an idea is meaningless without the right character to execute it. For me, stories aren't about taking the reader through a series of things that happened in places — they're about characters and how the world around them grows and develops them and their lives. Mallory isn't some stroke of luck protagonist who happened to work with the story. No, she'd been sitting in my head for a long, long time, wearing many faces and baring many names, just waiting for the right adventure to come along. Or for the right idiot to open the wrong book.

Fact 2: The main hero *will* be female.

Sorry, boys, but you've been demoted to sidekicks, damsels and redshirts.

I don't want young girls to face what I'd had to at their age: realising that less than a third of the books that they'd read contained female protagonists (McCabe et al, 2011). Or that, despite their unmatched brilliance, girls like Annabeth¹ and Hermione² were merely sidekicks told to stand back while the boy kicked down the door — a single shot of oestrogen to balance out the overwhelming amount of testosterone. And the YA genre's hardly better. Sure, there are more female protagonists but, for most, love interests are a primary element of their character arc. Even my beloved Trixie Belden, who hated the idea that she couldn't do something because she was a girl, had her first two books revolve around some boy who, spoiler alert, later becomes her boyfriend (Campbell Tatham, 1948 & 1954). My solution is to write these girls protagonists that are as smart and resilient and real as the females that surround them every day.

¹ From Rick Riordan's *Percy Jackson* series (2005-2009)

² From J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series (1997-2007)

Fact 3: I have a strong apathy for teenage romance.

I have nothing against those who enjoy a good teenage romance. I too have read books where this concept is handled well. But, I also became a preteen during the Twilight pandemic and endured the tsunami of day-saving-moralistic-hero and tall-dark-and-broody types that followed, providing the YA genre with pining, angst and a lot of abusive behaviour in the name of character development.

I'm not condemning love stories per-se; there's an art to the naturalistic built-up-over-an-entire-series slow burn where a friendship is developed before it blossoms into something more. Great skill is required to focus on exploring complex emotions, character development and the growth of a relationship whilst simultaneously adding intensity of stakes to the plot (Botting, 2008, as cited in Smith & Moruzi, 2018). Instead, I reference the basic teenage romance that should be a B-plot but, for some reason, seems to overtake the A-plot in importance. Females, especially teenage girls, are stereotypically portrayed as highly emotional beings, so their emotional storylines often take precedence over more action-oriented storylines, making their story a tribute to him. He's no longer a facet of her life — he becomes her life. It seems, the heroine could have prevented the downfall of an entire civilisation and somehow her first priority will be him — see Tris³, Katniss⁴ and Max⁵ for proof.

And is it the same with YA male protagonists? Does she overwhelm his plot? No. She's a plot point in his character development — only there to look good, be saved and, if she's lucky, show he is capable of emotion by being married, abused or killed. So, why should he get to be such a big part of her story?

Fact 4: My heroine can save her own damn self.

Protagonists have to get their hands dirty. There are fights to be had and swords to be swung, especially if, like Mallory, you're a non-magical being in a magical world. I'm tired of watching the same cookie-cutter guy play hero whilst the girl (if there even is one) watches as a captive or a coward. It's offensive because, quite frankly, girls can be freaking badass. And guess what, you don't need to be big or male to be mighty. I completed 3/4 of a sports science degree so I understand that post-pubescent males'

³ Beatrice Prior from Veronica Roth's *Divergent* trilogy (2011-2013)

⁴ Katniss Everdeen from Susanne Collins' *Hunger Games* trilogy (2008-2010)

⁵ Maximum Ride from James Patterson's *Maximum Ride* series (2005-2015)

natural testosterone levels typically provide them with more muscle fibres increasing muscle mass (Fry, Zatsiorsky & Kraemer, 2020) making them naturally bigger, stronger, fitter and faster. But, I argue that brains trump brawn. Believe me, I'm a high performance hockey goalkeeper who also did judo and I can tell you that as a 55kg female I've had 90kg males eating turf with a single slide tackle. They're bigger than you? Get lower. They're stronger? Use their force against them. There are entire fighting styles dedicated to giving the little guy the tools to beat the lummo, so, if you're smart enough, size and strength won't matter — and Mallory is definitely smart enough.

Fact 5: No one is anything just because of their gender.

I constantly have to work at this and am under no illusion that I have perfected it. I didn't realise how predisposed I was to stereotyping gender roles until I consciously avoided it. I attributed characters traits on the basis of functionality. *MBATCOL* required one character to understand basic human and animal/monster physiology and another to be artistic enough to create a field guide of these creatures (I was a little obsessed with *Spiderwick's Field Guide* (Black & DiTerlizzi, 2005) as a kid — Note the name Mallory for starters). So, naturally I assigned these traits like pink and blue in a gender reveal — science for him and art for her. But then I caught my sexism and thought: why had I done this? Mallory possesses a problem-solving reads-battles-like-a-chess-match type logic, so wouldn't she naturally connect with the scientific thought process? Plus, although excelling at science fits with Ace's straight-A personality, being good at art would provide more conflict with his Pleasantville-perfect family which fits in with his square-peg complex. Thus a self-imposed rule was born: The allocation of character traits has to be justifiable beyond what is considered 'typical' or normal — otherwise the trait must be redistributed.

Still, in empowering Mallory I didn't want to masculinise her or emasculate Ace through merely flipping the gender-stereotype. For Ace this required me to balance his agency with elements of passivity, to prevent him from overstepping as Mallory remained the hero. Similarly, Mallory required agency without denoting her femininity. In the YA genre, the 'strong female heroine' has become synonymous with adopting masculine traits. Nowadays, 'strong females' don't wear dresses. 'Strong females' don't like make-up. 'Strong females' abhor female-attributed activities such as shopping,

cooking and sewing. And, although they remain female in body and desirable to the heteronormative male (see fact 4), they simply ‘aren’t like other girls’, and that’s a damaging archetype to convey. As a kid I wanted to be like strong female protagonists: So, if Trixie Belden hated sewing (Campbell Tatham, 1948) and Tory Brennan refused to wear dresses unless she was forced into them (Reichs & Reichs, 2010) then I did too. It took years and countless episodes of *Buffy*⁶ and *Charmed*⁷ for me to realise that these things weren’t synonymous with strength. So, I want Mallory to be both strong and unashamedly feminine on her own terms — someone who wears a dress because she wants to and if she happens to have to fight a Hellbeast whilst wearing said dress, then so be it. She’ll do it, and then she’ll mend the holes in her clothes after she’s finished cleaning her knife.

Get it? Got it? Good.

⁶ Television series, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Berman et al., 1997-2003).

⁷ Television Series *Charmed* (Kern et al., 1998-2006)

What You See Isn't Actually What You Get

Growing up on the works of Enid Blyton and Julie Campbell Tatham, majority of the books I read were written in a formal third-person perspective. However, it was Rick Riordan's *Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief* (2005) that would leave a lasting impression on my writing. The series' foreboding introduction and the sarcastic register of Percy's first-person narration, were strong influences regarding the voice and structure of the novel. Therefore, although the prologue is written in third-person, *MBATCOL* isn't an omniscient commentary, but a first person account of the going on's in Belden. Much like Percy, Mallory is a narrator who is acutely aware that she is telling a story to someone.

Just To Clarify, I Did Not Sign Up For This

In urban fantasies, “*magic enter[s] into and disrupt[s] the urban environment*” (Mendlesohn & James, 2009) as the boundaries between the fantastical and mundane become “*destabilised or reordered entirely*” (McLennon, 2014). So, the hero isn't just fighting a mythical Hellbeast, but doing it in settings recognisable to the reader, like school halls, gyms and classrooms. Therefore, the fantastical must be accepted despite its presence conflicting with the norms of reality. This is a “True Story in My Universe” (TVTropes, n.d.) trope, wherein events are posed as true by the narrator regardless of their feasibility in the reader's world. This is common in urban fantasies and often done through a protagonist recounting their story to the reader using first-person past-tense narration. Occasionally some form of spin accompanies this, contributing to the wider lore of the novel/series regarding the nature of the narration. Riordan's *Percy Jackson* series is an example of the author 'acting' as a scribe for the protagonist as they recount their adventures. Whereas novels such as *Ready Player One* (Cline, 2011) and *Virals* (Reichs & Reichs, 2010) are examples of the protagonist acting as a pseudo-author, relaying their story to the reader for a particular reason. The *Mallory Best* series is more inclined towards the latter, despite Riordan's strong influence.

However, similar to *Percy Jackson*, I felt the circumstances of the novel's telling should be established early on, demonstrating that, as the narrator, Mallory won't only be active with her surroundings but with the reader also. The opening chapter, "*Just to Clarify, I Did Not Sign Up For This*" (p.4), focuses on Mallory's purpose for telling her story and is designed to establish this immediately and blatantly — although that second part is because Mallory isn't exactly the queen of subtle. The chapter's feel was gauged through analysing the affect of other introductory chapters in other works where the narrator has a more directly interactive relationship with an assumed reader, in particular, *Virals*, *Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief* and *Maximum Ride: The Angel Experiment* (Patterson, 2005). These novels immediately clarify that their narrators are not only aware that they're telling a story but that the reader is present too. Further, each respective protagonist opened their story by stating or alluding to the circumstances of their 'current' situation and, more importantly, why it happened to them. I considered these introductions and their purposes when it came to crafting my own. Tory's opening is more passive than the others, reading more as a stream of consciousness:

"The whole thing started with a dog tag. Well, a monkey with a dog tag. Take your pick... / Wait. / I'm getting ahead of myself. / It was a typical Saturday morning at home..." (Reichs & Reichs, 2010).

This makes it seem as if the story being told is being told just to be told. Whereas Percy opens with more intent, as his story is being told to warn the reader:

"Look, I didn't want to be a half-blood. / If you're reading this because you think you might be one, my advice is: close this book right now. Believe whatever lie your mom or dad told you about your birth and try to lead a normal life ... Don't say I didn't warn you." (Riordan, 2005).

Similarly, Max wants to warn the reader, not because her situation might pertain to them, but to inform them of the sinister going-on's within her world. Her story is a last ditch attempt to expose the ones hunting her and her family:

"But I'm not lying down just yet. I'm telling you, right?/ This story could be about you - or your children. If not today, then soon. So please, please, take this seriously. I'm risking everything"

that matters by telling you — but you need to know. Keep reading - don't let anyone stop you.”

(Patterson, 2005).

Each opening teases the reader with terms, scenarios and references they don't yet know in order to create questions and intrigue. However, it was the intent that clearly established the openings tone and tension. Therefore, if I wanted to open the novel this way, I as the author must understand *why* Mallory is telling this story. This became an intrinsic part of the novels construct through its integration into *Mallory Best's* lore.

Upon discovering the library, Mallory assumes the mantle of 'Keeper'. The prologue and introduction use this term in such a throw away manner majority of readers will probably forget about it. In fact, the most clarification the reader receives regarding this role is found inscribed on Williams' tombstone: "*Keeper of the Histories / Guardian of the Curses.*" (p.129) Although *MBATCOL* doesn't explain the Keepers function further, its significance will become important as Mallory begins to undertake the role's responsibilities. The Keeper is a rare individual charged with the containment, preservation and documentation of magic, and is consequently charged as guardian of the Archives. However, as it was once a role handed down from generation to generation, there is little written record regarding the Archive's magic. So, when the family line inevitably died, the new Keepers (ergo Daisy and later Mallory) were clueless regarding the handling of magic. Thus, *MBATCOL* is born as Mallory's way of keeping record of everything that happens to prevent someone else from having to fumble it all like she and Ace did. That is what this book is: a record of everything that happened.

Self-Appointed Personality Of The Year

It seemed straightforward to me that *MBATCOL* would be told in first-person. As a character-centric novel, I wanted the reader to be invited into both Mallory's world and head. Unlike third-person, where the lens objectively overlooks the whole world or, if subjective, the world of certain individuals; first-person invites the reader to see the protagonists world through their eyes. Further, readers of YA and children's series' that use third-person subjective narration, such as Scott's *The Secrets of the Immortal*

Nicholas Flamel (2007-2012), Rowling's *Harry Potter* (1997-2007) and Blyton's *The Faraway Tree* (1939-1951), tend to develop more of a focus and fascination with the story's world rather than the protagonists. Whereas, *MBATCOL*'s focus is on Mallory and her journey within the world of Belden, as opposed to Belden itself. Therefore, Mallory had to be someone who would grip and entrance the reader from the get-go, placing great emphasis on the development of her personality and, as a result, her voice.

The traits of YA narrators I enjoyed were considered when creating Mallory's tone and voice. These narrators, primarily Percy Jackson⁸, Tory Brennan⁹, Maximum Ride¹⁰, and Sawyer Taft¹¹, were attractive because of their humour and wit. They're examples of the "First-Person Smartass" (TVTropes, n.d.) trope, which is common in the YA genre especially in urban fantasies. These teenage narrators are sarcastic and facetious and unafraid to add little quips here and there as their stories move along. After all, what's the good of being put in mortal peril if you can't make snippy remarks about it? These personalities are big and colourful enough, that they can carry a story without becoming bland or losing the reader. Also, beyond entertainment value, they tend to possess relatable and vicarious elements. This is as these cheeky and, sometimes, snarky quips, whether spoken or thought, are things which the average middle-grade or young-adult reader would probably be too anxious or self-conscious to ever voice. This admiration and/or connection prompts the development of a reader-protagonist parasocial relationship, increasing reader investment in the story and, hence, world.

Whilst Mallory's voice is made distinct by asides and the odd fourth-wall break, using them too frequently risks drawing readers out of the scene or action and can hinder and overpower the story's flow. Whereas when used sparingly, a lack of tone and inconsistency of narrator personality is developed. Therefore, each blatant display of personality had to be carefully considered regarding its potential effect on the scene and reader. An amusing way Riordan achieves this within each of his works, was by writing the chapter titles in the narrators voice. In *Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief*, the reader is treated to headers such as "*Three Old Ladies Knit the Socks of Death*", "*I Become Supreme*

⁸ From Riordan's *Percy Jackson* series (2005)

⁹ From Reichs & Reichs' *Virals* series (2010-2016)

¹⁰ From Patterson's *Maximum Ride* series (2005-present)

¹¹ From Jennifer Lynn Barnes' *Debutantes* series (2018-2019)

Lord of the Bathroom” and “*We Take a Zebra to Vegas*” (Riordan, 2005). These provide insight into the chapters content whilst acting as a constant reminder that, no matter how serious the plot has become, Percy is a smartass. Also, by removing the magical elements from each chapter title, there is a form of deadpan humour that is quite entertaining for the reader. These chapter headings were something I wanted to emulate throughout the books, after all, it’s technically supposed to be Mallory who has written it.

Sometimes A Little Distance Is A Good Thing

The fast-paced, immersive and highly engaging nature of series’ are what make them attractive to young readers, especially in comparison to the more literary stand-alone novel (Nixon, 2000). *MBATCOL*’s first-person narration definitely lends itself to this style and, whilst this is a positive in creating intrigue and suspense, the subjectivity of its focus can limit the scope of information provided to the reader immensely. In order to circumnavigate this, I used the Veil and a third-person style prologue and epilogue to provide information and perspectives not subject to Mallory’s views and knowledge.

The Veil is the space between life and death, occupied by former Keepers who died in service of the Archives and only accessed by the living through their “*subconscious travel[ing] to the realm of the dead*” (p.81). Mallory’s presence being subconscious is an important factor as it means for once she isn’t in control of her situation allowing me to slow the tempo of the story. Further, a convention of urban fantasies are their realistic settings (Ekman, 2016), meaning Mallory has little to note of her everyday surroundings. However, when in the Veil, the magic alters her surroundings, no matter how familiar they appear, causing Mallory to take a step back and take note of the details, actively slowing the story giving the readers time to breathe and digest the information they’re provided. Also, due to the dream-sequences surreal nature, information could be provided abstractly, avoiding long periods of exposition. For example, “*The Room Where It Happened*” (p.72-77) shows how the Shadow was trapped without Daisy explaining it to Mallory. This lets her glimpse the Shadow’s face whilst also

demonstrating the stakes of magic as Cynthia uses her dying sister's remaining life-force to bind the Shadow to the book — but more on that later.

Reichs & Reichs presented another method of distancing through interspersing third-person subjective chapters focusing on antagonists in order to provide the reader with more information than known to Tory, thus building suspense. I considered doing this, however, upon developing Mallory's meta-role as Keeper and narrator I decided to remain within Mallory's consciousness in order to avoid drawing the reader from the story by altering pattern. It did demonstrate, however, how an epilogue written in alternative perspective can effectively build suspense for subsequent story. In *Code* (2013), Chance, a recurring antagonist who has witnessed Tory's packs flares, digs in to the research that made them virals¹², vowing that he “*will get answers*” (2013). This builds into the B-plot of *Exposure* (2014) and ultimately the A-plot of *Terminal* (2015). I wanted to emulate this sensation of suspense that I, as a reader, felt when reading *Code* within *MBATCOL*. That is why I chose to focus on one of the characters introduced in the “*Here We Go Again*” (p.146) dream-scape whom Myrtle suggests is part of the prophecy, stating “*you will find the compass where trees meet. You will know what to do then.*” (p.149) This character is recognisable due to her short black hair, leather jacket and the “*long white scar ... through her left eyebrow*” (p.146). Further, the “*tiny silver compass*” (p.146) worn around her neck identifies her as the compass of prophecy. This, in combination with the last chapters' abrupt ending and the epilogue stating that she's headed to “*the corner of Elm and Oak*” (p.169) should most definitely suggest that the series is just beginning.

¹² Humans whose DNA mixed with canine due to an awry experiment (Reichs & Reichs, 2010).

Unexpected Curses Make For Strange Deskfellows

Heroes rarely face their battles alone and they're almost always accompanied by an array of friends along their journey. These friends lend their ears, brains, bodies and shoulders throughout, helping the hero overcome obstacles and demons, both physical and mental. The best friends challenge the hero to be better and do better, even if this leads to conflict and doubt. Regardless, the unwavering support and loyalty their camaraderie provides is crucial for the confidence and mental security of the protagonist. This is most aptly put by Luna Lovegood¹³ where she states that, if she were Voldemort, she would want to make Harry "*feel cut off from everyone else; because if it's just [him] alone, [he's] not as much of a threat.*" (Yates, 2007)

When approaching the primary partnership between Mallory and Ace, I began with what I wanted their relationship to become: symbiotic and strong enough to withstand the tests and trials they'll face. From this stemmed a considered look at the interplay of their traits and characteristics, as well as a deep understanding of the nature and progression of their partnership.

Ace Anderson, Ladies And Gentlemen

Without Mallory, Ace's character wouldn't exist. Everything from his look to his circumstances were carefully considered to balance or compliment her — even his name, Ace Anderson, had to work with Mallory Best. However, the most considered trait was his personality and temperament as this dictates both their friendship dynamic and his function within her story.

Mallory is headstrong, independent and witty; she speaks before thinking and isn't afraid to stir the pot but she also has a strong moral code. This combination of impulsivity and integrity gives her an organic sense of agency and motivation that has the potential to lead her deep into the world of the archives. Like any hero, she answers the call because it's the right thing to do. This doesn't leave much space for Ace, as sidekick, to fill. She didn't need a comic for humour or an explanation-prompting

¹³ From the film adaptation of J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*

Watson, and, although the gender twist would be appreciated, damsels get frustrating over time. Instead, she needed an anchor. Ace personally is both reserved and calculated in a way that has been trained since birth. His family, who are prominent members of Belden society, are demanding with their expectations and monitor his life intently. If he isn't where he's supposed to be, or is late to dinner because he's fighting a Hellbeast, they notice. Therefore he'll always have one foot firmly in reality. And, although Mallory's nature encourages him to follow his dreams and develop his independence, he can't let the magic call to him in the way that she does. Because of his obligations in reality, he can't readily accept the magical world, regardless of his desire to. So, as the series progresses and the magic threatens to overwhelm Mallory's existence within the non-magical world, it will be his job to remind her of the world she came from.

Deadly Curses And Other Ways To Make Friends

It was important that Mallory and Ace weren't friends before *MBATCOL* begins. They didn't necessarily have to be enemies or rivals, but their pairing needed an element of reluctance and unfamiliarity. This allows their partnership and dynamic to be something that is constantly changing, requiring them to actively work on it. Ultimately their partnership was founded out of necessity, so there's a natural progression that it must follow to eventuate into the required level of trust. I wanted their friendship to progress from indifference/annoyance to tolerance to acquaintances to friendly conversation, until they develop trust and grow into allies and, eventually, friends. This is a long-term progression plan that will be executed over the course of several books. By the end of *MBATCOL*, they were to cusp an alliance and begin to develop that crucial sense of trust in one another. Due to their forced collaboration I believed that they could achieve this despite *MBATCOL* only occurring over three days. As an athlete I understand how the physical act of collaboration and support can accelerate this sense of trust in a way communication won't. When you're out there on the field of play, knowing your teammate's greatest fear or their most embarrassing story won't guarantee that they'll have your back no matter what, but them being there, especially when things get tough, will. So, when it comes to trust,

action truly speaks louder than words, which is why I chose to use each confrontation, magical and mundane, as a chance to organically develop their trust.

At the start Mallory doesn't exactly want to be in Ace's presence, so, although they're both looking at the cursed books, they're doing so separately. Further, when the Shadow's initially released, Mallory faces it alone. There's no trust yet, and no dynamic to work with. They're separate entities who both happen to be fighting against the same thing. The Orson Warrior is a small turning point for them. The Shadow's theft and destruction has provided them with a common enemy and sense of responsibility. However, when they're presented with an opportunity to split up, Mallory wants to stay and fight whilst Ace wants to listen to Mr Wilson and run. Even though Mallory leaves Ace to do so, and it seems they might separate again, he eventually follows Mallory's lead and ultimately defeats the Orson Warrior. They're beginning to work together and understand that there is risk in working alone. However, at this stage, supporting the other is still a choice and they're both very aware that it's circumstantial. So, when Mallory later storms away angry with Mr Wilson, Ace listens to his teacher and chooses not to follow despite his instincts telling him he should. By the time they have to face the Hellbeast, Mallory and Ace have spent more time with one another and found a way to work together through research. They have come to the conclusion that whatever they're going to have to face, they'll face together. So this battle becomes an amalgamation of their development as they use one another as a means of overpowering the beast. They make distractions, follow each other's instincts and rely on their partner to do their job. Once again, Ace was given the chance to save himself and leave, but this time he doesn't hesitate to stay and help Mallory by getting her back her dagger.

It is this progression of trust, and the knowledge that the other isn't going to get going the moment the going gets tough, is incredibly important in the development of friendship. It's what brings Mallory and Ace's relationship from a state where Ace avoids Mallory and Mallory stays silent as her classmates mock Ace and his family, to the point where they'll ultimately speak up for one another and aren't reluctant to be seen together in public. It isn't quite friendship yet, but it provides a stable enough foundation that their friendship can be built up throughout future novels into that symbiotic relationship that was envisioned.

The F.F.F. (a.k.a. The Foxtrot Friendship Formula)

The progression of friendship isn't always linear — especially for teenagers and young adults. They're filled with tensions and unanswered questions of insecurity, and numerous conflicts, no matter how small. The best fictional friendships don't avoid these conflicts, instead welcoming them as a platform of development regardless of how frustrating the process or result may be. In this process, for every step forward in trust or affection there will be a test that either enforces or breaks this newfound connection, causing the relationship to either move sideways or backwards — much like a foxtrot. Eventually they'll reach a point of security where the support of the other is unconditional; the point of the 'I'm with you to the end' promise. This is what I want to eventuate with Mallory and Ace. As previously stated, action and assistance, especially regarding mortal danger, can fast-track this development of trust, as shown through hundreds of alliances within superhero ensemble fiction. However, it's the softer, quieter moments of inter-character conflict and challenge that inspire introspection and develop the characters' bond. Further, they deepen the characters' understanding of their friendship, which can be arguably more important. *MBATCOL* works to lay the foundation of this, as to progress Mallory and Ace's partnership a step closer to their eventual stage of friendship.

Considering this, I drew from the relationship between Emily Thorne and Nolan Ross in Mike Kelley's *Revenge* (2011). Their partnership was initially reluctant, as the untrusting Emily views Nolan as a liability. However, common cause and their complimentary skillsets ultimately made him a necessary ally and, eventually, a trusted friend. Their friendship's progression was constantly slowed: whether it was from Nolan bugging Emily's house or her putting him in danger. However, it was in the quieter moments that we saw their relationship flourish: when Nolan calls Emily out for the looseness of her morals or encourages her to drop her plight and be happy; or when she reminds Nolan that he isn't blameless for his role in their plight. Over the seasons, as their relationship grew, we saw their responses to these moments progress from reluctant acceptance of the others' words to immediate reconsideration of their actions and how far they're willing to go. The trust they've developed provides a fundamental understanding that the other only wants what is best for them. The result of these softer challenges is a depth and security of the friendship that becomes a very comforting constant throughout

the series, especially as tensions rose. The viewers knew that, no matter the trial, there would always be a Nolan and Emily, and the importance of this eventuality is in how the unconditional friendship allows for tensions to be directed towards the climax of an overarching plot.

For the *Mallory Best* series, there will come a point where Mallory must face the Shadow. As Emily did, Mallory will have to endure a lot of fighting and danger to prepare her for this show-down, and by building her partnership with Ace to a secure constant she will be emboldened to do what needs to be done. *MBATCOL*'s quieter moments occurring in the real world contribute towards this more than the action in the magical world. These occur at Ivy's (p.83-85) and Mrs Cootes' science room (p.51-53) where they not only acknowledge how little they know of one another, but also afford to talk and slowly get to know each other. And, although they might not know the other's greatest fear yet, they will at least be able to come out side feeling more comfortable with their partnership - and for now, that is enough.

Magic: It's Not Just For Kids Anymore

As MBATCOL is an urban fantasy, it was crucial to establish, not only a firmly constructed magic system, but also a clear distinction between the worlds of reality and magic. Maintaining this distinction requires me as the author to clearly understand the rules of MBATCOL's magic system (aka Archival magic) regardless of whether they're clarified in the series' first novel. By solidifying these rules early on I will also be able to maintain consistency throughout the overall series.

Would You Like Your Magic System Hard Or Soft?

Magic systems are a fascinating element of fantasy that influence so much about the overall cohesiveness, tone and speed of the work itself. For example, magic in the world of *Harry Potter* is very loose: whilst, the user requires a wand and incantation, there appears to be no limit to which magic can be used and comes at no cost to the user. Therefore, the stakes of Rowling's world remains in the danger of the opponent as opposed to the danger of the magic itself. Whereas the magic in Scott's *Flamel* series, though as far reaching and loose in what it can achieve, comes at a cost to the user and requires great sacrifice to be accessed in the first place. According to Sanderson, the lack of magical limitation classifies these as soft magic systems (2007). Personal preference guided me away from this magic system as, although it's incredibly immersive and often evokes that sense of awe some readers look for with fantasy, there is a tendency for the world of the magical to overwhelm the reality. Hence why many works containing soft magic systems will extract protagonists from their reality into a purely fantastical world. However, as magic invades Mallory's reality in *MBATCOL*, a harder magic system is required. Hard magic systems are very regimented in their construct, with clear rules and limitations that are often dictated by the cost associated with using the magic (Sanderson, 2007). This tends to make these magics more consistent in execution and outcome. Consequently, these magics are harder to learn and can be used more as a tool when it come to solving problems, meaning it's something an individual has to learn and master as opposed to intrinsically do. Thus, the rules, limitations and costs

of Archival magic are closer to hard magic systems, requiring me to use the feel of magic and its contrast with reality to evoke soft magic associated sensations of wonder and mystery.

Life On The Magical Highwire

When engaging with the softer, more wondrous side of magic, Mallory is the perfect vessel of information. As narrator, she is closely attuned to reality, therefore, although she mightn't consciously register magic's presence or its depth, she is always able to understand how she feels in the moment. This required a deep focus on establishing how magic engages the senses as the reader needed to be able to consistently understand the feel of magic from the beginning, so they themselves would be able to detect its presence if Mallory can't. Through engaging the senses I hoped to tap into that sense of the uncanny, and hence mystery and wonder, where the reader can identify that something isn't quite right.

I drew Archival magic's visual qualities from Suzanne Collins' *Mockingjay* (2010), wherein Peeta's hijacked memories "*have this strange quality about them. Like they're too intense or the images aren't stable*". Peeta notes that this makes the false-memories "*shiny*", eventually allowing him to identify them. Similarly, Archival magic has a golden haze about it, "*sparkling, like glittery pixie dust*" (p.16). Sometimes this shimmer is subtle as with Mal's dagger and the gold titles of the cursed books. However, other times when Mallory is surrounded by magic, as in the Veil, everything is bathed in gold like "*the world had been dipped in lemon tea*" (p.66) or "*a weird sepia film about the hottest day of summer*" (p.27). I chose gold over silver and other metallic shades due to its warmth, which draws direct contrast to the cold blackness of the Shadow. Gold also has close association with illumination and, through magic, Mallory is literally uncovering an entirely new world. Further, I wanted it to seem as if Mallory and the reader stepped from the dull, cooler world of reality into this vibrant, warmth of magic.

Magic is electric. It's drawn from all forms of energy which fills the air with a charged static similar to that of an electrical storm. This sensation is closely related to Archival magic's relationship with the first law of thermodynamics. Mallory feels it when she first enters the Archives and the longer she is exposed to magic, the stronger it gets. It raises the hairs on the back of her neck and surges an unbridled

energy through her body whenever she is in its proximity. Similarly, this energy awakes the existing senses, enhancing them to a supernatural degree:

“As I reached for one of the books, a shiver went down my spine. It was the kind of feeling you get when someone enters the room behind you without making any noise. I could hear every one of my breaths in surround sound; the steady thud of my heart and the whisper of movements beyond the door and into the library. I could feel every current of air tilting the hairs on my arms and the back of my neck. I could see each and every tiny dust mote caught in the light, which made me realise how dusty the room was.” (p.14)

These intensified sensations allow me to deepen my descriptions of her surroundings, prolonging time between actions, which can provide the feeling of time slowing down. This not only allows the reader to be immersed in the presence of magic but also enhances the sense of wonder Archival magic develops. Further, through repeating magical sensations, even subtly, I hoped to attune the reader to the presence of magic. This provides a solid, perceptible differentiation between the worlds of magic and reality which, due to reader anticipation, can provide a sense of the uncanny to the most mundane situations.

The First Law Of Thermodynamics And Other Inconveniences

Ironically, a magic system is strengthened by the limitations set upon it as they alter how the magic can be used, making it unique to its particular body of work. Sanderson states that *“without limitations, there is no innovation”* as limitations *“force your characters (and you as a writer) to stretch in solving problems”* (2012), thus adding a greater level of dimensionality to characters. For *MBATCOL*, I considered both the story’s logic as well as the limitations in other bodies of work. Through this process I developed four clear rules that I would apply to my magic system, and, whilst similar rules have been applied to numerous magic systems the way in which they interact with and affect the world of *Mallory Best* is individual to the Archival Magic system.

Rule 1: Magic obeys the first law of thermodynamics

“The Hellbeast drew a deep breath: a low gravelly rumble like water being sucked down the drain came from its throat. A light from somewhere inside it illuminated its uvula from behind ... I could feel the heat rising, beginning to evaporate a layer of sweat from my forehead.”
(p.114)

This rule is why the Hellbeast cannot expel endless torrents of fire. Instead it requires time to recharge its energy, as, under the first law, no energy is created and none is destroyed. Therefore, although energy can be manipulated and changed into many different forms, such as fire, that energy must come from somewhere. Further, this rule prevents magic from being limitless and affixes cost to it (more on that later). Archival magic considers the sourcing methods of two different magic systems. The first reasons that there is a limitless energy source that all magical beings can call upon, similar to ‘The All’ (Ruditis & Kotz, 2011) from *Charmed*. Here, a form of energy runs through everything in existence, making it a singular never-ending well from which magic users can draw from in order to enact their incantations, minimising negative affects on the user. I am currently undecided whether purely magical realms, such as the Veil, draw from a similar limitless source, making this a theory to be considered in-depth later. The second sourcing type utilises the energy of the magic user unless they channel their magic from an external source. In Morganstern’s *The Night Circus* (2011), Celia conducts magic using her own energy, consequently exhausting herself, whilst Marco tethers his magic to the bonfire, removing any resulting symptoms. Similarly, *MBATCOL*’s Hellbeast must recuperate its energy between fiery-torrents as it draws its power from within, giving Mallory and Ace time to recover and fight.

Rule 2: Magic can only be seen by those touched by magic.

“If you do not believe me, wait beside the entrance to the Archives ... and watch. In the presence of magic, most become confused or disoriented. Their minds provide excuses either to explain or ignore. I don’t know why, but they do.” (p.25)

This rule provides answers to several potential plot holes. Firstly, I didn't want the reader to question the intelligence of protagonists' decisions. Characters like Harry Potter have been criticised due to their tendency to take a problem in hand instead of consulting an adult, which would provide a much quicker and less painful solution. Therefore, *MBATCOL* needed to provide a reason why Mallory and Ace don't just tell an adult and ask for help with managing the magic. This rule also answered why the archives were rarely found, despite its location in the public library. This is as Archival magic is shrouded by an invisible substance that obscures magic from human eyes. As with the *féth fíada* of Celtic mythology, all things with a magical origin that don't influence the non-magical are invisible to them and don't register on their consciousness (MacKillop, 2004). However, once this magic imposes on the lives of the non-magical, it bears closer resemblance to Riordan's 'mist' as the magic is replaced with a tangible, non-magical explanation in the observers mind (2005). For example, when the average Belden residents witnessed the Hellbeast, they registered its size and physique as that of a regular wolf or bear, regardless of the fact that there are no bears in Belden. Their subconscious substituted the magical for a more understandable mundane creature.

Rule 3: Magic can only be destroyed by magic.

"Guns and kitchen knives won't work on the magical ... the properties of human metals are ineffective. If you want to harm or even kill any one of these creatures, you have to use weapons forged in realms far from here." (p.44)

Similar to rule 2, this limitation was created to make Mallory and Ace's ability to fight the magic harder. Without this rule, theoretically, anyone could grab a semi-automatic weapon and shoot the Hellbeast down, but that doesn't require much skill or finesse. I wanted the combat scenes to be blood-pumping and classy, where closeness is unavoidable making the stakes higher. Therefore, restrictions had to be applied to the types of weapons that can be used in combat with a magical creature. Initial inspiration for this stemmed from the works of Rick Riordan, where the monsters faced by the heroes can only be destroyed by weapons crafted from specific metals of celestial bronze, imperial gold or stygian iron. In

applying this rule, I am not only increasing the skill and luck required to win a fight, but I am also forcing Mallory and Ace to accept and engage in the magical world if they have any hope of surviving.

One area of this rule I am not certain on yet, is whether this rule solely applies to the weapon/method of destruction. In the TV series adaptation of *Wynonna Earp* (Adams et al., 2016-present) the rules on weaponry are similar, where revenants¹⁴ can only be banished using the gun Peacemaker. However, there is a separate clause that specifies that only the oldest living descendent of Wyatt Earp can fire Peacemaker, killing a revenant. This specificity has caused me to question whether the nature of the individual brandishing the weapon is enough to meet this rule's criteria. This would mean inherently magical individuals wouldn't require magical weapons to kill monsters. Although this doesn't currently require an answer, it's something for me to consider as the series progresses.

Rule 4: Magic cannot exist outside Belden

"The magic is confined to Belden. Nothing magical can survive outside the town's borders."(p.41)

Theoretically, Mallory's world is a realm without magic with Belden acting as the exception. I didn't want the magic to extend beyond Belden, as I wanted Mallory's journey to be one of circumstance, wherein she wouldn't have discovered magic had she not moved there. Also, Mallory's character has no strong ties to Belden and, in fact, plans to leave as soon as she graduates. So, I felt that by confining the magic to Belden, not only was I further isolating the town but I was also introducing to Mallory a reason to stay. As she becomes the Keeper, she becomes bound to the Archives and hence Belden itself. Further, the answer as to why Belden is the sole place of magic in the earthen-realm will be explored in subsequent novels.

¹⁴ The demonic reincarnations of outlaws killed by lawman Wyatt Earp

Yeah ... That'll Cost You Your Firstborn

“*Power always exacts a price*” (Harkness, 2011) and it’s one closely linked to magic’s limitations. Sanderson states that “*the best limitations will have real effects on the characters*”, making the magical cost, and hence world, “*more interesting ... than the benefits*” (2012). The cost’s severity is at the author’s discretion and can provide a great source of tension, as the stakes of using magic alters the characters’ methods of problem-solving, regardless of whether a task can be done using magic or not.

The first law of thermodynamics means magic will affect the user. In short “[magic] *has its limits. If [you] push too hard, it pushes back*” (Young & Friedlander, 2010). Inspiration for the cost of individual magic use was found in Scott’s *Flamel* series, where magic feeds from the users aura, which is closely related to their life source. Therefore, small uses of magic add up, causing the user exhaustion, whilst large uses could cause death. Therefore, despite possessing the awakened ability to wield magic, users are limited in what kind of magic they use, further providing the characters with opportunities to develop throughout the series. Similarly, this type of cost is why Mallory cannot spend prolonged areas of time in the Veil, as transporting her consciousness there depletes her energy, leaving her tired and headachy after visits. “*Apparently, the body doesn’t like it when your subconscious travels to the realm of the dead. Who knew?*” (p.78) The most fatal demonstration of this cost, however, is shown through Cynthia’s entrapment of the Shadow, where she uses the remaining life force of her dying sister to bind the Shadow to the cursed tome in which it was trapped.

“[The gold light] seeped out from beneath her fingers, out from the spine of the book. Wispy tendrils snaked up her arm and across her body to the girl until the child was shrouded in a brilliant white light ... a wave of light crashed over [the Shadow]. It smothered the darkness into the floor and dragged it back to the book, leaving only charred marks across the rug.”
(p.77)

Whilst, not only demonstrating the level of sacrifice required to destroy the Shadow, this cost adds another darker dimension to the contents of the Archives, as the reader considers the hidden cost regarding each cursed book.

Another magical cost is the residual mark it leaves on the individual. As Daisy states, the magical world “*is not a world you can step away from ... The truth is you have been marked with magic, and once that happens there is no going back.*” (p.25) This cost prevents Mallory from opting out of fighting as, if magic does leave a fingerprint, her willingness to participate is irrelevant because any monsters released would come for her forcing her to remain within the world of magic. Riordan’s *Percy Jackson* inspired this cost, as half-bloods are detectable by monsters through their scent, though its intensity varies depending on the individual’s knowledge and parentage. Therefore, in the mortal world, demigods are constantly being attacked by any monsters within the area, making their quests more difficult to complete. I also wanted the remnants of this magical-fingerprint to linger too, especially in places magic users frequent. This is why the Hellbeast headed directly for the school instead of roaming the streets, as it was a place Mr Wilson, who has been surrounded by magic for decades, frequented. In future books, this will also mean that Mallory and Ace’s homes and the library itself will be at risk of monster attacks, further increasing their motivation to destroy the Shadow once and for all.

Conclusion

Serial novels present different requirements than their stand-alone counterparts, as their purpose affects all elements of creation: from the broadest conceptualisation and awareness of direction, pace and character development, to the smallest details of foreshadowing. But it's the promise of what's to come — the questions left unanswered — that is the hallmark of serial works. Traditionally the denouement ties pretty bows over each storyline as the book slows to a close. However, *MBATCOL* was not to do that as it functions as an introductory novel to a pentalogy and acts as the foundational layer for the story to come. It's purpose is to introduce readers to Mallory and Ace, and Belden and Archival magic to formulate the development of a greater story. Consequently, the climax of the Hellbeast's death occurs sixty-one pages from the end, indicating that the story is nowhere near finished. Instead, Mallory is marked by the Banshee, solidifying her, and Ace's, place in the Shadow's prophecy and ensuring their inability to depart from this magical world they have found. At *The Curse of Lupa's* resolution the buildup to the sequel begins, leaving Mallory's final words hanging in the air like the smell of Hellbeast — "*It's just the beginning*" (p.168)

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