

An Eye for the Mane Chance

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Master of Creative Writing

AUT

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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 other institution of higher learning.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be 'A. H. G. G. G.', is located in the upper right quadrant of the page.

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An Eye for the Mane Chance:

Blurring Lines and Challenging Tropes in the Modern Fantasy Novel

‘An Eye for the Mane Chance’ is a plot-driven piece of Speculative Fiction, exploring themes of self-acceptance, humanity and justice. In writing my novel I set out to challenge the tropes of Fantasy fiction, particularly the roles women and magic.

I challenged the trope of the white male hero and his romantic interest by choosing a female protagonist, and I further challenged classic fantasy gender roles by giving Avis stereotypically ‘male’ characteristics. Avis is a flawed character; she has issues with anger and her sarcastic and brash demeanour does not endear her to the other characters or indeed, to the reader. Nonetheless, Avis is a sympathetic character whose faith in herself, and in other people, is tested and developed throughout the novel. It was important for me to bring out Avis’ emotions in the action, as the themes of the book are heavily entrenched in the characters’ internal thoughts and feelings.

It followed that this choice should influence another trope; the romance or ‘the hero gets the girl’. As someone who has always placed more value on friendships than romantic relationships, I always enjoyed the ending of Tolkien’s ‘The Lord of the Rings’ trilogy (1954-55). I found it a pleasant change to have a protagonist who ended the novel, not with a wedding, but with a deeper appreciation for his friends, and this is what I wanted for Avis.

I set the novel in the modern world and brought the fantastic into the ordinary. In my creative work, I wanted to create a world where the fantasy elements and fantastic creatures are a natural part of the landscape, created as much by biology, breeding and evolution as magic. Like Rowling, I embedded the fantastic community of my story within the ‘real’ modern world, though unlike in ‘Harry Potter’ (1997-2007) my fantastic community does not actively attempt to hide itself. Instead, Human Denial plays a large part in not seeing ‘things that shouldn’t exist’.

In this way I was able to blur the lines between genres and downplay the role of magic in the story.

●Challenging the Hero Trope

The trope of the white male hero is endemic to fantasy fiction, from Harry Potter to Frodo Baggins. As Hourihan puts it;

In Western culture there is a story which has been told over and over again, in innumerable versions, from the earliest times. It is a story about superiority, dominance and success. It tells how white European men are the natural masters of the world because they are strong, brave, skilful, rational and dedicated. It tells how they

overcome the dangers of nature, how other ‘inferior’ races have been subdued by them, and how they spread civilization and order wherever they go. It tells how women are designed to serve them, and how those women who refuse to do so are threats to the natural order and must be controlled. It tells how their persistence means that they always eventually win the glittering prizes, the golden treasures, and how the gods—or the government—approve of their enterprises... The story of the hero and his quest, the adventure story, is always essentially the same. It is the story of Odysseus, of Jason and the Golden Fleece, of Beowulf, of Saint George, of the Knights of the Round Table, of Jack and the Beanstalk, of Robinson Crusoe, of Peter Rabbit, of James Bond, of Luke Skywalker, of Batman, of Indiana Jones, of the latest sci-fi adventure and the latest game in the computer shop. It appears in countless legends, folk tales, children’s stories and adult thrillers. It is ubiquitous. (Hourihan, M. 2005, p2)

This is the first trope of fantasy which I wanted to challenge, and my challenge was twofold. Hourihan referenced the ideal of the subservient, obedient woman we see so often repeated in fairy-tales and fantasy fiction; characteristics which are falsely presented as ‘female’. My first challenge then was to create a heroine with typically ‘male’ characteristics; brashness, impatience, independence. My second challenge was to create a capable heroine, who reflected *my* ideals of women.

Growing up as an expat in Hong Kong, China, I was subject to a mix of Asian and Western ideals, especially in the media I was subject to. For example, the animated cartoons I watched perpetuated an Asian ideal of women; the female characters in the anime I watched were typically pretty and petite independent females with big eyes and small waists. These female characters were openly emotional, even angry and dominant in their interpersonal relationships. This is very different from the western ideal, perpetuated by Disney. The ideal of strong, independent women in these particular anime may have influenced my nature today.

In particular, I share Kuon and Weimar’s (2009) attitude to women in literature.

In terms of teaching girls to be leaders who will grow up to be women in leadership and teaching boys that it is acceptable and admirable for girls to be leaders, it is important to provide children with examples of fairy tale female characters who are adventurous, capable and strong. By sharing tales that depict capable and clever females in conjunction with traditional fairy tales which tend to portray females in more traditional ways, we can

broaden the perceptions of children and help them to value and accept strength and leadership abilities as qualities to be sought for both genders. (Kuon & Weimar, 2009)

The character of Avis was partly inspired by Pratchett's Sam Vimes, first introduced in 'Guards, Guards'. It is for this reason that I made her a Private Investigator, and the mystery plot for the novella naturally followed.

Avis is a flawed character; she has issues with anger and her sarcastic and brash demeanour does not immediately endear her to the reader. Nonetheless, Avis is a sympathetic character whose faith in herself, and in other people, is tested and developed throughout the novel. I developed her character drawing on other strong female characters from the mystery genre, including Lilly Rush of the television series 'Cold Case' and Agatha Christie's Miss Marple. These characters are not predestined heroes, nor do they have any special ability or gift that makes them capable of catching criminals. They are ordinary people who accomplish a goal, in this case, justice for the wronged, without magic and with only their own skills and personal attributes.

The television drama series, Cold Case, features the female protagonist Lilly Rush. Rush is a homicide detective, whose primary role in the series is solving old murders, often without forensic evidence or with misleading testimony. As a character, Lilly Rush is brave and bold. Like Avis, she never lets herself be belittled or pushed around; in several scenes we see Lilly defend herself physically from, and even overpower, male aggressors. Avis does not have the training or physical conditioning of Lilly Rush, and realistically she struggles in a physical confrontation with a man who is bigger than her. Consequently, she finds herself in a vulnerable position. At this point, however, I felt that it would be flawed to have one of her male companions rescue her, as Avis has been such a driving force of female strength throughout the novel. Likewise, to have her default to the 'dirty tactic' of kneeing her aggressor in the crotch seemed a cheap cop-out.

Terry Pratchett's Sam Vimes is all for fighting dirty; Lilly Rush is governed by rules of engagement set out for law enforcement. Avis, however, is governed by her emotions. When the opportunity arises, Avis punches her antagonist in the face; tactically this is a foolish move as it exposes her and may not work, but on an emotional level this is the act that releases Avis from her negative emotions and allows her to put them behind her for good.

Avis reached down inside herself for every iota of anger and inadequacy this man had ever invoked in her, and in one fury-fuelled movement she rolled over and slammed her fist into his nose. (Haggath, 2015, p110)

It was important for me to bring out Avis' emotions in the action, as the themes of the book are heavily entrenched in the characters' internal thoughts and feelings. We see a similar setup at work in Agatha Christie's 'Miss Marple' series; it is often human emotion and behaviour that drives the plot and provides the clues. Miss Marple herself is an amateur sleuth with a quick wit and sharp observational skills. She takes advantage of her sweet, old-lady appearance to gain information about the suspects and victims of murder, often by gossiping with servants or locals, as people never suspect a gossipy, seemingly scatter-brained old lady, of ulterior motives. Marple discovers the perpetrator through her familiarity with human behaviour. She thinks about the murderer's inner thought process and draws it out to solve the murder.

● **Blurring the Lines of Character/Plot-driven Fiction:**

'Plot-driven' and 'Character-driven' are publishing terms and are used by publishers as an indication of how to market the book in question, more than they are a reflection on the book itself. However, these terms are useful in exploring themes. Plot-driven stories are commonly classified as 'genre fiction'; stories in which readers expect to find the murderer caught, the world saved, or the romance ended, as the dramatists say, with a death or a wedding. Fantasy fiction is typically plot-driven and explores themes based in external conflict; good and evil, war and peace, heroism and destiny.

For example, Lewis McGregor (within Bandte, 2015) says that in 'The Lord of the Rings':

Even if you remove Frodo, who is more or less the main protagonist and replace him with another Hobbit, the event, which is the battle for middle earth still takes place, the call to action still exists...

J.R.R Tolkien's 'The Lord of the Rings' trilogy (1954-55) and J.K Rowling's 'Harry Potter' series (1997-2007) are both examples of plot driven fiction dealing with themes of good versus evil in external conflict. Terry Pratchett's 'Discworld' series (1983-2015) deals with internal conflicts; Vimes struggles with his identity as a Copper and being a 'good man'.

Internal conflicts lead to ‘character-driven’ or character-focussed themes in fiction. In Publishing terms, character-driven fiction is fiction in which the events of the novel are directly linked to the character’s inner thought processes and decisions. This is not unlike Miss Marple’s approach to murder-mysteries, as opposed, for example, to Lily Rush, who looks for physical evidence.

‘An Eye for the Mane Chance’ is focussed on themes of self-acceptance, humanity and justice. These are character-focussed themes and are drawn out by the internality of my protagonist. She struggles with her relations to other people and to accept herself as the flawed, but nonetheless morally good, person she is. Her antagonist John Peacock is a direct contrast to Avis; he is at ease with his corruption while Avis struggles to be a better person; he disregards the fantastic creatures in the book as ‘not really people’ while Avis actively tries to come to terms with and accept them.

“Please,” John scoffed derisively. He eyed his uncle, ignoring the old man’s confusion and worry in favour of insuring that blasted leprechaun was kept at bay. He sneered at Paddy. “They’re not people, they’re *creatures* Avis. Says so in any book you read; that’s why we call them fairy-tale *creatures*.” (Haggath, 2015, p109)

However, as a piece of genre fiction the novel is, by necessity, plot driven. Avis does not create the situation that she finds herself in. Rather, she finds herself in the midst of a supernatural murder investigation and the story reflects how she reacts to that situation.

● **Blurring the Lines between Genres**

‘An Eye for the Mane Chance’ is heavily influenced by the fantasy, science fiction books which I most enjoy reading, namely the works of Terry Pratchett, Douglas Adams, JoAnne Rowling and Tolkien. However the work itself is not exclusively fantasy. The plot itself is a murder-mystery akin to detective fiction; the characters are mythological species like the leprechaun or the succubus; there is no magic at work in the novel and the whole thing takes place in a modern British town. This would make the book hard to categorise in terms of classic genre categories; I have chosen to use a Mystery plot, but the world of the novel features creatures normally synonymous with the fantasy genre, yet while fantastic elements are present, the lack of magic makes the overall genre Science

Fiction and not Fantasy. Many writers nowadays are challenging the limitations of definite genre lines in a similar way;

In recent years, genre blending has exploded as Mystery writers added vampires, ghosts, cowboys, wizards and even classic literature to the mystery genre, adding additional audiences who might not have read a Mystery. For some, the appeal is still in the mystery element, but the supernatural has become very popular. Even in these books though, the emphasis is still on characters and plot. (Orr & Tixier Herald, 2013, p. xx)

‘Speculative Fiction’ is an umbrella term for novels like ‘An Eye for the Mane Chance’, which draw themes and elements from a range of genres’. Orr and Tixier Herald (2013) state of Speculative Fiction that:

... elements of the fantastic appear in many novels, which are not necessarily considered Fantasy. Specifically, readers often confuse Fantasy with Science Fiction, Horror and Paranormal romance. These genres, like Fantasy, fit under the umbrella of “Speculative Fiction”- Fiction that takes place in worlds unlike our own, even those that might seem the same at first glance. (Orr & Tixier Herald, 2013, p. xx)

Setting my novel in the modern world is not a new idea; J.K. Rowling’s extremely successful ‘Harry Potter’ series (1997-2007) shows that readers will gladly suspend their disbelief for a fantasy story set in 90’s Scotland. Provided the premise is plausible, readers have no issue with a modern fantasy, and the trope of medieval or alternate worlds is an unnecessary limitation on the genre.

Readers engage with Speculative Fiction because they are looking to have their imagination engaged and stretched (Svec & Winiski, 2013) and blending the ordinary with the improbable, blending fantasy with mystery and science fiction, is one way to achieve this for both reader and writer.

●Challenging the Magic Trope:

●Downplaying/Disrupting the role of magic in fantasy-science-fiction:

J.K Rowling’s ‘Harry Potter’ series (1997-2007) is in some ways a modern retelling of ‘The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe’ (1950). Like Lewis, Rowling sets her magical world as being hidden from the modern world (at the time of the book’s publishing) and accessible through a magic door. For Lewis, this is the back of a particular wardrobe; for

Rowling, it is a dingy London pub or the barrier at Kings Cross Station. The magical world of 'Harry Potter' is visible to only those in the know.

In Terry Pratchett's 'Discworld' series (1983-2015), magic is a part of the landscape but the majority of the characters do not use it to solve their problems. In fact, magic is usually depicted as an unpredictable and intrusive force that only makes things worse when the characters try to use it.

In Tolkien, magic is largely a weapon of evil. Gandalf, the 'good' wizard in the story, rarely uses magic either in battle or in his own defence. Instead, he largely depends on his elf-made blade and swift horse to do battle. In fact, magic is depicted as a corruptive force, as both Saruman and Denothor allow Sauron's magic to corrupt them. Unlike Rowling, magic is the tool of the antagonist alone. Victory for Tolkien is achieved by the perseverance, bravery and will-power of characters completely without magic.

I wanted to disrupt the role of magic in a similar way. My hero is not predestined in any way. She has no special power besides what she has earned or learned herself. She is, in a word, ordinary.

Like Rowling, I embedded the fantastic community of my story within the 'real' modern world, though unlike in 'Harry Potter' (1997-2007) my fantastic community does not actively attempt to hide itself. Instead, Human Denial plays a large part in not seeing 'things that shouldn't exist', as is revealed in key scenes throughout the novel;

"But how?" She turned back. "How can people not see it, it's right there in front of them!"

"Like as not, whoever shot that just saw a really big deer, or something else rare to these parts. A white stag maybe." Paddy folded his arms tightly, shifting his weight from one foot to the other. "Unicorns don't exist you see," he added, wryly.

"But that doesn't make sense!"

Paddy shrugged again.

"You'd be amazed how determined humans are to be the only intelligent species on the food chain," he said. (Haggath, 2015, p51)

Depending on the creature in question, this may be passive (as with Paddy, who can easily pass for human) or may be a result of deliberate manipulation on the part of the creature (as with Al, the succubus). In this way I maintain a magical or fantastic element in an understated role, not unlike Terry Pratchett's approach to magic and magical creatures. Terry

Pratchett reinvented the Tolkienesque depictions of fantasy creatures for humour; his trolls are stupid, but only because they slow down at high temperatures; his dragons are tiny and explosive, because only a vast source of magic could keep a giant lizard in the air.

●Challenging the Magic Trope:

●Blending the ordinary and science-fictional/fantasy world:

Douglas Adams' 'The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy' (1979) and Doug Naylor and Rob Grant's 'Red Dwarf: Infinity Welcomes Careful Drivers' (1989) each feature unlikely, average people as their protagonists. While Arthur Dent is perfectly boring and suburban, David Lister is simple, uneducated and a slob. 'The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy' is set in a literally modern (at the time of the book's writing) world, where Arthur Dent begins his day protesting the demolition of his house and unexpectedly ends it escaping the demolition of his planet. The idea that an undisputedly average person can be plucked off the planet and into an adventure appeals to my imagination. The works of Phillip K. Dick in particular explored this ideal;

In his works, anyone could, quite literally, save the world, often through small gestures of simple kindness. None of his characters were outsized superheroes, but they often managed to do the right thing. As fellow sci-fi writer Ursula K. Le Guin put it, "There are no heroes in Dick's books, but there are heroics." His sense of moral democracy — a belief that despite their flaws and failings, ordinary men and women could do noble, selfless things — aligned him with the most optimistic beliefs of the 1960's and '70s. (Hicks, 2012)

'Red Dwarf' on the other hand, is set far in the future. However, the Earth Dave Lister leaves behind is easily recognisable as the one we know, albeit with better cars and interplanetary mining vessels looking for crew.

In my creative work, I wanted to create a world where the fantasy elements and fantastic creatures are a natural part of the landscape, created as much by biology, breeding and evolution as magic. The idea that new, humanoid species could arise from natural selection seems more plausible to me than entire species supported by magic. For example, the Cat, in Doug Naylor and Rob Grant's 'Red Dwarf: Infinity Welcomes Careful Drivers' (1989). In the world of my novella I tried to create a fantastic community of creatures who likewise came to be through natural selection, like the pigasus;

“It’s like that human myth of the Pegasus, only, you know, actually likely from a biological perspective.”

“You’re saying it’s a pig with wings,” said Avis flatly, eyeing what looked like crumpled folds of saggy skin across the animal’s back. “*Bat wings.*” In all other aspects it looked much like a wild boar, if a tad more streamlined and muscle-heavy around the front. Al snorted derisively.

“Well what mammal have you ever seen with feathers?” he said. “Honestly, this is what happens when people learn to talk before they learn how to spell...” (Haggath, 2015, p100)

When I was building the world of my novel I had to give thought to which fantasy creatures to include and how these creatures might differ from myths if they had evolved naturally and without magic. This is why centaurs bear closer resemblance to wild horses and hill ponies than majestic chargers, and why succubae have a biological allure, pheromones, and not a magical hypnotic gift. There had to be plausible biological reasons for fantastic creatures being the way they are.

● **Challenging the romance trope:**

Finally I wanted to challenge the stereotypical ‘hero gets the girl’ ending and the roles of heroines in romance.

Tolkien’s ‘Lord of The Rings’ trilogy (1954-55) were the first books to introduce me to the idea that the hero did not have to have a ‘love interest’. To my own mind, the heroines of some of my favourite books exist only to be the love interest and motivator for the hero, rather than strong characters in their own right. Rowling has a Ginny for her Harry, Adams has Trillian for Arthur, even Pratchett must have a Sybil for his Sam; but instead of a female opposite, Frodo has Samwise Gamgee.

It might work out better to have the balanced protagonist (or hero) and the passive counterpart, and the balanced protagonist and the active counterpart. In this case, the counterparts would give the Hero the motivation needed – which could possibly be called the desire to protect and the need to help – without bothering with gender identity, which is quite fluid in real life and which is becoming more and more visible in modern-day fiction. Which raises the question of whether a love interest is even needed. If what the protagonist needs is a counterpart, then the love interest could be eliminated without any problems. (Lissauer, 2015)

As someone who has always placed more value on friendships than romantic relationships, it is a pleasant change to have a protagonist who ends the novel, not with a wedding, but with a deeper appreciation for his friends. That said, a romance is pleasing in a novel. Sybil and Sam are among my favourite characters in Pratchett's many books.

I, however, chose to focus on friendships in my novella. The nature of Avis' relationships with her companions is one of mutual respect and appreciation at the end of the story, and as a personal choice I feel that this is an important aspect of interpersonal relationships to promote in media.

Conclusion

In writing my thesis it was important to me to challenge both myself and the tropes of fantasy fiction with a modern fantasy novel. I set the novel in the modern world and brought the fantastic into the ordinary, blurring the lines between genres, classifications and, indeed, worlds in the process. I challenged the trope of the white male hero and his romantic interest by choosing a female protagonist, and I further challenged classic fantasy gender roles by giving Avis stereotypically 'male' characteristics and having her end the story, not with a romantic partner, but with the sense of contentment that comes from having friends to rely on and a future that looks promising.

'An Eye for the Mane Chance' ends with Al and Paddy engaging in banter, while Paddy helps Al walk back to their accommodation in the hamlet. As Al and Paddy originally had an uncertain, if not unfriendly relationship, this is important because they find common ground in Avis. Paddy has known Avis for some time, and though he has disapproved of many of her actions and choices throughout the book he ends the story by giving her his approval; Al states that he 'sounds like Avis' and Paddy implies that this is a flattering comparison. Al, meanwhile, defends Avis as 'noble' to the centaurs, which is important as his loyalty has been to the centaurs over Avis for most of the novel. Avis lies to law enforcement to keep scrutiny off Al and Paddy, even though this means the policeman is suspicious of her motives in being in the Wolds. All three characters end the novel with a greater appreciation for each other, and in this way I think I have been successful in both disrupting the romance trope, and keeping the interpersonal relationships of my characters believable and realistic.

I am most pleased by the use of a heroine for my protagonist. Gender roles in fiction are something that I am passionate about. I feel that Avis is a character who represents and develops into a role model for young women; she is not without flaws, but she learns to

control and work with her flaws. For example, she channels her anger into something productive. She also tries to be a better person even when she doesn't always feel like she is succeeding. She is independent, thick-skinned and, eventually, successful in her chosen career. As a character I feel that Avis is believable and relatable; as a hero, she embodies the classic characteristics of the hero, being a strong, capable leader whose gender does not define her.

She doesn't need a man to save her, just as she doesn't need a romantic relationship to be content at the end of the story.

When challenging the magic trope I came across the concept of genre blending; I wanted to write a fantasy story without magic, but when I researched generic conventions I found that there are no fantasy stories without magic. In fact, in doing so, I was writing a science-fiction story, which felt very strange to me given the abundance of fantastic creatures in the book. It was then that I came across the terms 'genre blending' and 'speculative fiction'; an umbrella term that gave me free reign to draw from all of the genres I enjoy without limitations. I think 'An Eye for the Mane Chance' is an interesting take on modern fantasy; it downplays the role of magic in the landscape like Pratchett, interacts with the modern world like Rowling and makes ordinary people the hero like Adams, Grant and Naylor.

I have mentioned before that it was important for me to bring out Avis' emotions in the action, as the themes of the book are entrenched in the characters' internality, and particularly in Avis'. Themes of self-acceptance, humanity and justice are developed through Avis reactions to her interactions with the landscape, the action and the characters. The act of punching John in the face is the act that not only releases Avis from her negative emotions and allows her to put them behind her for good, but is symbolically the act that embodies self-acceptance. Avis accepts her most crucial flaw and uses it to free herself.

I believe I have achieved what I set out to do. However, there were things that I had hoped to include or develop in the book, which never made it to the final draft.

I had considered developing or implying an attraction between the secondary characters in the book as an alternative to the 'hero gets the girl' trope, but in the end I felt that this would distract from the story and the message I was trying to get across. I feel that non-romantic interpersonal relationships are often overlooked in novels and films, and that mutual respect and appreciation are more important to promote. It was for that reason I abandoned this idea.

There were a great many more fantastic creatures that I wanted to develop and explore in the book, but I simply didn't have the time or space. Originally, Al was to list examples to Avis and perhaps introduce her to other members of the fantastic community as a means of convincing her; perhaps people who once went to her father for help. However, I found this distracted from and delayed the action too much, and I removed a lot of it. The nature of the cases that Avis' father took on for the fantastic community was another aspect of the exposition that never made it into the final manuscript. I wanted Paddy to use Avis connection with her father to get her more emotionally involved in the investigation, but I ran out of time. However, now that the final draft is complete, I find myself shying away from this idea, as it diminishes the significance of Avis making this transition for herself.

Similarly, in Al's character I had the opportunity for social messages on the subject of acceptance and difference. However, I felt that pushing those messages or forcing them in dialogue devalued them. In fact, Avis casual acceptance felt more natural to me and got the point across just as strongly.

Altogether I feel that in 'An Eye for the Mane Chance' I achieved my goals, challenging tropes and blurring lines in the modern fantasy novel.

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