

Mark Johnson

FireWall

FireWall

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ABSTRACT

The following work, *FireWall*, constitutes the ‘creative practice as research’ component of the Master of Creative Writing degree. It is preluded by an exegesis explaining the aims and goals of the creative work *FireWall*, as well as a Postscript explaining what happens after the narrative is complete.

FireWall is the story of four young men who flee a massacre they have been falsely blamed for in their homeland. They chase the culprits to a dead end in another land, only to find they have been caught up in a new, but related struggle for the lives of gods themselves. The four men begin to untangle the threads that led them to this place, learn how they survived the massacre, and what they will need to prevent another.

Their pursuer from their native land learns of their innocence. As she investigates further, she plots the destruction of her own organization for their own parts in the massacre.

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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 acknowledgments), 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.

Mark Johnson

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The AUT MCW 2013 cohort. New friends, same boat.

Exegesis:

The Audacity of Optimism

Introduction

This exegesis is designed to explain my intent and creative process in writing the novel *FireWall*.

FireWall was conceived as the first novel of a trilogy throughout my final year as a high school teacher in 2012, as I began to tire of the industry and looked for a challenge, finding an answer in creative writing. During that year I researched my book, applied for the AUT MCW programme and began writing pieces of what would become the opening chapters.

FireWall was mostly written and plotted between January 2013 and August 2014. Due to the unusual length of the work (though typical of the genre), I required an extra half-year to complete the novel.

In consultation with my advisors, I truncated the novel to half its 190,000-word size, for fear of submitting an inferior work. This truncation is explained in my Postscript at the end of the submission.

FireWall is a high fantasy genre story set in a secondary world. The plot revolves around four refugees fleeing a massacre in their homeland, who become caught up in a greater, though related, plot to destroy their newly-adopted land. The dominant theme of the work is the traditional genre one of good versus evil. Subthemes include the ideas of 'good being unable to triumph if it does nothing in the face of evil', and 'redemption'.

A Reaction to 'Grimdark'

The aim of this work is to explore the idea of 'optimism' within fantasy fiction. Recent decades have seen the growth of the subgenre 'Grimdark' within fantasy fiction.

Grimdark will be discussed in greater detail below, but at this point it will suffice to label it as a subgenre that shows a pessimistic view of humanity and the universe in general. I do not wish to imply that Grimdark is the only type of fantasy that is selling currently. Indeed, Brandon Sanderson's *Stormlight Archive* may possibly be the biggest series in fantasy novels at the moment, and is clearly not Grimdark. My desire to push back against the Grimdark sub-genre comes from how it seemingly dominates what I call 'the fantasy conversation' at the moment. Grimdark is perhaps at its zenith in 2014, as the popularity of George RR Martin's 'Song of Ice and Fire' and its related media can bear witness, with myriad other Grimdark authors such as Joe Abercrombie, Brent Weeks and Steven Erikson evincing a similar worldview.

FireWall is my reaction to, my tiring of, the prevalence of Grimdark within the genre. While it is undoubtedly true that the moral and plotwise simplicity of 1980s fantasy (such as David Eddings, Tracy Hickman/Margaret Weiss and Terry Brooks) had much to learn from the setting and character complexity that has come to be known as Grimdark, arguably Grimdark's excessive selfishness and brutality is as oversimplified as David Eddings' and Terry Brooks' boy farmers retrieving magical swords from dark lords.

I wish to examine the half-way point between traditional 'sword and sorcery' and Grimdark, hopefully retaining complexity but fulfilling a sense of moral balance within my protagonists. To abruptly summarize my problems with Grimdark, 'assholes being assholes to other assholes does not a compelling character study make'. This is not to claim Grimdark cannot create interesting characters, but to create a world where everyone has serious personality disorders is little different from the perpetual happiness of a children's storybook. This is simultaneously not to claim all authors other than Grimdark authors are still stuck in the 'swords and sorcery' world. Authors such as Mark Charan Newton, N.K. Jemisin and Daniel Abraham are by no means the designers of simplistic, traditional medieval worlds or characters. Where I will attempt to differ from these accomplished authors is in the making of a work *explicitly* intended to evoke 'hope'. It is my desire to create complex characters, who attempt being 'white knights' to save a 'town' from 'the dark lord'. I emphasise these three terms, because they are 'sword and sorcery' tropes, but none of which you will find in my novel in clearly recognisable form. I hope.

Religious Reconciliation

I also wish to reconcile aspects of the religions of the world with the magic systems that exist within fictional fantasy worlds. From my fascination with the development and practice of the religions of the world, I wish to borrow and develop aspects of the Taoist,

Zoroastrian, Islamic, Jewish, Hindu, Baha'i, Christian and Buddhist faiths to create a 'plausible' magic system, and intend to explain how aspects of these religions have been inserted into my fantasy world. Out of many potential avenues, I have chosen the following religious ideas as the 'engine' and motivator of this particular work. These ideas are found within each religion, though they are expressed differently in each. The ideas are those of:

1. Righteousness. Each person must behave in a manner of doing the right thing for the right reasons.
2. Religious ritual. Easily the most contentious of all religious aspects, I have tried to cut to the core of the intent of religious ritual, for what they wish to accomplish, through the use of fire at the centre of my magic system. Zoroastrianism, the oldest known monotheistic religion, uses fire as its object of worship. Judaism and Christianity share a prophet who learned ten divine rules through the use of a wood fire. Hindus have a week-long festival of lights – considered as fire, less than a century ago. For this reason I have chosen to use fire as the 'fuel' for my magic system.

Structure

This exegesis will examine:

- How my novel, FireWall, will fit within the existing fantasy canon through aspects such as dystopia, magic system, quest/siege narrative, and trilogy structure. This is by no means an exhaustive list of the conventions of fantasy, though it is a list that frames my novel well for the purpose of this exegesis.
- How this work relates to other notable works in the genre, both by similarities and differences. Among these works I will also include some science fiction texts which could be considered as aspects very similar to fantasy, which is generally not the standard of the science-fiction genre.
- My writing style, narrative structure, tone and intended audience.
- Weaknesses in my work that I need to continue developing.

The Theory of FireWall

This work is High Fantasy, as termed by Alexander, or as Epic Fantasy as termed by Zahorskiand, as 'Fantasy Fiction set in an alternative and entirely fictional world rather than the read or primary world.' Although assuredly not of this world, my setting seeks to mirror the real world by gathering monotheistic religions in a manner the reader will hopefully feel

familiar. All the gods of my world are from within the same ‘pantheon’, with the same basic spiritual rules and laws, though they be spread over the entire world.

Grimdark

The label ‘Grimdark’ seems to have originated from the ‘Warhammer’ game series with the phrase “In the grim darkness of the far future there is only war.” There is a paucity of consideration of ‘Grimdark’, even though amongst the fantasy community it is a common term. I have however found reference to noted Grimdark authors George RR Martin and Joe Abercrombie as being called ‘Realistic Fantasy’. As Burcher and Hollands, et al say of ‘Realistic Fantasy’ in *Core Collections*, “worldbuilding authors... examine the high price characters pay for their ambitions. No longer stereotypical heroes and villains, these people have mixed motives, and it is sometimes difficult to find a ‘good guy’. Magic and *deus ex machina* don’t sew up these stories with neat endings, and major characters can and do die. Brutal language, violence and sex may take Realistic Fantasy more for mature YA and adult readers.” This is arguably an effective definition of ‘Grimdark’, though the word ‘Realistic’ could be misplaced, seeing as the excessive brutality of Martin, Erikson, et al is not particularly realistic. These authors are making points about the nature of storytelling and common romantic perceptions of heroes, but if this were ‘realistic’ to as much of humanity as Martin pretends, we would not have a surviving culture left to us today. A more accurate title could be something like ‘Atrocity Porn’.

As author Katherine Addison writes in *Of Better Worlds and Worlds Gone Wrong* when she defends hope within literature, “‘Reality’ is not simple to define... and just because a literary movement or several have chosen to privilege and valorize darkness and gritty brutality doesn’t actually mean that that represents “reality” any more than My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic or The Care Bears (that plague of my own childhood) does.” Weronika Laszkiewicz states in *Finding Gods in Fantasy*, that “Robert Jordan... has described Fantasy as the only genre in which moral struggle can be talked about with a straight face.” In my novel the protagonist encounters agents of ‘absolute evil’ and ‘absolute good’. It is a joyous relief that in fantasy, evil can be personalized and anthropomorphized, as an antagonist.

Attebury wrote of Tolkien’s concept of eucatastrophe; the joyous resolution. Magnus Vike, in *The Familiar and the Fantastic*, writes that Grimdark, or ‘Realistic’, authors do not write much joyful resolution, “mainly due to the fact that the characters involved are not heroes or protagonists in Tolkien’s sense, and Tolkien’s notion of a sudden joyous turn is based on the reader’s moral allegiance to the protagonists.” Hopefully by the conclusion of

this submission, the reader will appreciate Terese Saarg to the extent they wish for her own eucatastrophe.

Further, in *Of Better Worlds and Worlds Gone Wrong*, Addison writes that “Cynicism is fashionable in the current Grimdark era, the attitude that we are too smart to be taken in by idealism. And god knows it’s true that human beings are capable of evil—not only of committing atrocities, but of reifying atrocity into a cultural ethos... But human beings are also capable of breathtaking self-sacrifice and compassion and grace, and denying that gives as false a view of human nature as denying our capacity for evil. And that, I think, is where hope comes in. If we understand “escapism” as the Escape of the Prisoner rather than the Flight of the Deserter, then surely what motivates it, more than anything else, is hope.” Peter Hunt writes in *Fantasy and Children*, that “Fantasy therefore becomes a commentary on, or a satire on, real life - and my first formulation of this law suggested that this happens so often that it is quite difficult to find an example where it does not.” One of the aims Grimdark seeks is to upend what used to be ‘traditional fantasy’ with its idealistic farmboys and altruistic wizards, but the pendulum has indeed shifted quite far past the realism that traditional fantasy lacked, into a world of extreme brutality and selfishness.

Grimdark is indeed a satire of traditional fantasy that has now become mainstream in mediums such as Martin’s *Game of Thrones*. A young adult coming of age in 2014 could be forgiven, after reading Martin, Abercrombie’s *The Blade Itself* or Mark Lawrence’s *Prince of Thorns*, that fantasy is ‘that blood, guts and arseholes’ genre.

Previous Material/Precedent

Being a fantasy reader and writer, I am aware of the sentiment that there is truly little that is new, under the sun. All ideas one reads are basically improvements, adaptations, regressions or new understandings of previous ideas. High Fantasy is a ‘fantastic’ example of this. Authors in the genre often take an aspect developed by one author and explore it. For example, Terry Goodkind used several ideas of Robert Jordan such as secret, evil female magic users in his *Sword of Truth* series, and Jordan himself used the imagery of Tolkien’s ringwraiths in *Eye of the World*. Tolkien himself wrote *Lord of the Rings* under inspiration from *Beowulf*.

There is very little precedent for New Zealand fantasy writers. The one New Zealand fantasy writer I am aware of is Helen Lowe, who writes YA fantasy. This is a roundabout example of how, being a New Zealand writer, I am somewhat bereft of social/cultural peers. I do not consider this an especial disadvantage, given the accessibility of e-books in this age of technology, but more of a blank slate and the opportunity to create art I find compelling

and challenging. That being said, I have difficulty placing *FireWall* within the fantasy genre because I am not aware of any other authors who have created a work with; a heroic female lead who undergoes redemption, living 'cities', attempted reconciliation of religious aspects and Europeans/those with white skin as being the underclass, all living within a dystopia.

However, I can point to my greatest influence as the late Robert Jordan, whose *Wheel of Time* series raised the bar for all fantasy in the late eighties, ending in 2013. Most powerful for me, was his realistically flawed protagonists who carried the world on their shoulders and his intelligent exploration of the natures of good and evil. It is this examination that inspires me to attempt creating definite good and definite evil within a novel. The reaction of the humans within the novel to that evil, hopefully becomes the greatest definition of that evil. Another influence is Brandon Sanderson (who finished Jordan's series after his death). Sanderson's settings in series such as *Mistborn*, *The Stormlight Archive* and *Elantris* are profoundly innovative, dystopic and different from other fantasy settings in their technologies and magic systems, as well as actual physical settings. I am aware that choosing these two as my greatest fantasy influences make me appear as if I may not perhaps have the greatest fantasy repertoire, but there is a reason Sanderson was chosen as Jordan's successor. Both men possess(ed) uncommon genius at making the impossible mundane, and this, as you will discover from suffering through the first draft of *FireWall*, is desperately what I wish to emulate.

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines 'science fiction' as "fiction dealing principally with the impact of actual or imagined science on society or individuals or having a scientific factor as an essential orienting component." 'Speculative fiction' is genre term coined by Robert Heinlein to express dissatisfaction with the limits of science fiction, or an alternate designation for science fiction that contains elements that could be considered "fantasy" or "mystery."

Speculative fictions that contain elements so removed from present-day reality may as well be fantasy, as it would be difficult to explain how they work. For example Kim Stanley Robinson's *2312* and David Brin's *Existence* and *Uplift* novels. Kim Stanley Robinson wrote his science fiction novel *2312* as a piece of optimistic fiction. Global warming, terrorism and pollution all exist for Robinson's future Earth, but technological answers to these life-altering problems are found in the re-terraforming of Earth, centuries after our ruining of the ecosystem. The constant stream of 'this is also possible, despite what we encounter on Earth' is optimism, and while not playing down the seriousness of the threat, also poses questions of how we may counter the dilemmas. This optimism I wish to emulate in *FireWall*.

'The Quest Narrative'

In fantasy literature, when a quest is required, it is a traditional attempt to move the plot forward with its roots in Beowulf and Tolkien. In such works, the 'macguffin' is established in the prologue or first chapter and the rest of the quest serves to progress the characters while showing interesting characters, cultures and technologies. It works very well in the hands of master storytellers who manage to successfully integrate the journey metaphor into the character's development, but this is not conducive to my storyline. An alternative to the quest narrative would be the 'siege' narrative, wherein the drama of the storyline comes to the protagonists. I decided this 'siege' narrative the best way to examine my setting, by forcing the action to take place within the same small space.

To this end, I created the idea of the Polis, a living city that doubles as the god of its inhabitants. I further restricted my characters to one particular dysfunctional territory of the *polis*, so I would be bound to focus on character and theme above the easier way of pushing them outside to look at the grand 'flashing lights' of the setting. Literally, outside the setting of this submission are grand flashing lights of the 'big city'.

The Dystopia

Not unique to young adult fiction, dystopias serve as compelling arenas to explore characters and social ideas. Orwell's 1984 and Huxley's *Brave New World* would be the standard examples of such an environment, but more recently are plentiful examples, such as Sanderson's *Elantris* and Lawrence's *Prince of Thorns*, either by physical environment or by human nature. My dystopia was intended as a vehicle for my characters to overcome their own personal demons and grow into the heroes their environment needed. It was also an attempt at a statement of what is possible when one remains true to what is good and right, no matter what your environment. In a word, being righteous. My protagonists begin to stand out more for their actions and choices than their unusual abilities, due to the socially adversarial nature of my environment. The physical environment I have set *FireWall* within is more or less a desert, with the occasional and still relatively-functional ancient fountain providing water for its people. During the course of the extended work, it is shown this place was once fertile, but the 'fall of man' has reduced the environment to a more deserted wasteland, though parts of the land are still living and functional the further one gets from where I have sent my protagonists.

The specific ideas I wish my dystopia, *Sumad* to evoke, will be more effectively viewed from within the context of my entire trilogy, as my setting goes from dystopia to utopia. By the end of the first sequence of events, I wish to have established the idea of hope as being entirely valid and possible, even within a forgotten and hopeless place like Sumad. If one lives in a righteous manner.

Magic System

The magic system of any fantasy novel acts as setting, character foil and plot driving engine, and usually takes up an enormous amount of word space as the author is obliged to show you how this power works and how it is considered by those around the magic system. A concept the reader of this exegesis may not be aware of is that of Brandon Sanderson's 'Sanderson's First Law' (SFL): "An author's ability to solve conflict with magic is DIRECTLY PROPORTIONAL to how well the reader understands said magic."

I considered SFL when writing *FireWall*. The magic system my protagonists utilize also involves much explanation of my world and its history. Indeed, the 'magical problem' that plagued my protagonists since before the prologue is utilized as the answer to the major plot problem my characters face at the climax. This scene is (hopefully) made more effective by the explanations of my magic system that I have provided throughout my work. SFL has allowed me to give a reasonable understanding of how my magic system works. I could have written more about the 'how' of my magic system, but such would have taken up more wordspace than I was capable of giving in the length I have allowed myself in this work.

Monsters

Dragons don't fascinate me as they do others. Some readers believe fantasy is incomplete without dragons. Some can make do without dragons, allowing elves and dwarves instead, giving them rich histories and other worlds they have come from. But I cannot relate to mythical beasts of near or above human standard. *Different* animals from what we know of are fine with me, as that is more setting-related.

I think it comes from my need for fantasy to ask questions of ourselves on multiple levels, from questions of honesty, to politics and religion, to history, social structure and environmental custodianship. When I see someone pick up a sword to go kill a dragon or troll or whatever, and the dragon is just a dragon with little metaphorical or allegorical weight behind it, I become disengaged.

So when one reads 'monsters' in my work, it hopefully comes clear that my point is that *we* are the monsters in the same way an Irish peasant would have viewed the Vikings

one thousand years ago. Or that we are to blame for the conflicts we have brought upon ourselves. Or failing that, perhaps a reader will see the *FireWall* sequence as a zombie and robot book, which I suppose I would prefer over a dragons and elves book.

Structure

Self-publication seems to be the mostly likely route for me to be published, the submitted section will serve as the first part of a sequence. I.e. the entire *FireWall* can be broken into four parts, so the entire work becomes more episodic – more ‘Dickensian’ – than a traditionally published novel. This is different from traditionally published novel structures, but the world of publishing is changing and an 80,000-word e-book is easier to chew than a 200,000-word novel.

Religious References

As Laszkiewicz states in *Finding Gods In Fantasyland*, “One reason why religious themes and motifs so frequently appear in fantasy literature is the genre greatly relies on the world’s mythological heritage.” I believe most fantasy novels are a manner of exploring truth. Due to my fascination with the world’s monotheistic religions, I have attempted to represent the common core of these belief systems in my cultures and magic systems, as my own way of exploring the ideal of an ultimate truth. Laszkiewicz further states “the cosmic struggle between good and evil requires the presence of gods or other divine figures to form the basis for such a conflict, and an array of heroes that will have to choose sides and who are, as a result, entangled in a web of serious moral choices.” In my world, I have designated the gods as living cities and regions of land, somewhat sentient beings that accept prayer and send prophets to spread their messages and battle evil. If one is to battle evil, “The conflict... requires a savior figure, i.e. someone to suffer and sacrifice himself for the benefit of the community; this savior figure can be easily related to various myths and religions of the world, including Christianity.”

Religious ritual varies, but in many religions we find reference to the importance of fire. Zoroastrians believe it divine and an engine of God. For Christians and Jews, one of their primary prophets received ten divine rules from meditating under the protection of a burning bush. Islam teaches that fire is sacred. Hinduism burns sacrifices and has the five-day festival of Diwali for cleansing and purification. For this reason I chose to put fire as the primary, untapped reservoir of energy for both good and evil, and everything that stems from the fire – protection, weavings of energy and the name of the Wall and of the novel reflect this importance.

To reflect my research of religion, I have chosen the following references to clue my reader in on the universality of my world's religion:

- 'Atabham' – the religious text of Sumad. It is 'Mahabharata' backwards and a little altered, telling morality tales with spiritual laws as the Mahabharata does.
- Islam – Religious terms of *Inshallah*, *haji* and *jihad* are used, as well as naming the religious tome of another land as the 'Recitation', which is the translation of the word 'Qur'an' into English.
- Judaism – References to prophets Samuel and Abraham are translated as Shumuel and Avramun. At one climax (not within this submission), a pyramid is seen inverted upon another pyramid, hopefully bringing to the reader's mind the image of a six-pointed star.
- Christianity – at the climactic moment (not within this submission) a sacrifice is made by someone with arms outstretched. Who comes back to life later (but not three days later as I think that is laying it on a bit thick).

You Have No Damsels Here, Gandalf the Grey

It would be futile to attempt pinpointing where feminism began in western literature. Certainly not as far back as when Chaucer's *Miller's Tale* as Alisoun, the vapid object of desire is passed between three men, but perhaps before Shakespeare's Portia in *Merchant of Venice* outwits the entire Venetian legal fraternity. In fantasy, Tolkien's warrior princess Eowyn must have been unique to readers at the time, though perhaps it required a female author such as Le Guin or Marion Zimmer Bradley to cement the female voice in fantasy.

As Kameron Hurley's *We Have Always Fought* demonstrates, women are not new to the martial arts. They have taken part in wars and conflicts as long as winners have recorded their histories. My female characters Sarra and Tressa are not as aggressive as Steven Erikson's female protagonists, nor victims of cultural sexism as Martin's Cersei or Sansa. Much like Abraham and Jordan's women, Sarra and Tressa are career women, working with men or in tandem with men. I made it a point to not 'de-gender' my women as Erikson does, but to have them react as women and to pass the Bechdel test multiple times. Their strength shows through in their capacity to protect themselves and change the world they live in, without a white knight to save them. They are more intuitive and communicative than the four male 'heroes' one would think would lead the story, who stumble as often as they succeed. I made Tressa a mother for the simple reason that I have never read a female fantasy protagonist in her thirties, who is also a mother. Her moral struggle is compounded by her identity as a mother, which makes her growth more compelling. One may note that Martin's Cersei is also a protagonist and a mother, but Cersei has been treated very badly

and is in many ways a victim. Tressa is no victim, as she brought karma upon herself and her story begins as she picks herself up and out of her situation.

Yeah We Gotta Get Outta This Place

The dystopia is a compelling environment for character growth and development, both physically as in Howey's *Wool*, or in social culture as in Martin's *Song Of Ice and Fire*. It asks questions of ourselves in ways not usually considered. I chose *FireWall*'s setting as the body of a living god as an examination of man's relationship with the divine, when said relationship is tangible and atheism is impossible, but also happens to be a dystopia.

My dystopia, the *Polis*, is dysfunctional not because of the physical environment, but how the people who live within it treat one another. As the later, currently unrefined sections of my novel show, living in such apparent environmental inhospitability is indeed possible if people are willing to work together to do so, to make the dystopia a utopia. This, then, is the source of my motivation to explore optimism in fantasy, in a time of climate change and economic, technological uncertainty.

FireWall's character relationships to the social environment are similar to Ahmed's *Throne of the Crescent Moon*, whereby my (heroic) characters seek to improve and progress themselves and their environment and end up causing positive change. Where I differ from Ahmed is by the nature of my physical environment, which is a physically impossible one, whereas his is easily plausible. In this way I believe my work is similar to hard science-fiction/speculative writer Robinson's *2312*, with fantastic environments of the far future, such as his 360-degree, rotating, enormous asteroid *terrariums*, where humans live in orbit around the solar system. His world, though technically possible, is almost as akin to fantasy fiction as is Iain M. Banks' Culture series, due to the far advancement of science. His world requires much explanation and 'worldbuilding' to be understood, at the same time as his characters also work towards the greater good of mankind. And, darn it, they succeed as well. If a reader were to categorize me as an apparent fusion of Saladin Ahmed and Kim Stanley Robinson, two speculative authors focusing on optimism, I would feel well-accomplished as a world-builder.

The point of living in a dystopia (for me) is to show what is possible within the depths of the human soul, and how one may progress and grow even if your world falls apart. Were I to place my work in the more fantasy-traditional setting of medieval technology and social stratification such as Rothfuss' *Wise Man's Fear*, Hobb's *Assassin's*

Apprentice or Kay's *Tigana*, my focus would have shifted from environmental strangeness and coping mechanisms to dealing with situations such as war or abusive relationships. While these are indeed worthy and compelling 'growth devices', I am at greater ease painting upon a more abstract and fantastic canvas.

Closets and Trains and Compasses, Oh My!

Burcher and Hollands et al, consider 'low fantasy' such as Rowling, or 'portal fantasy' as Narnia or Pullman's *Dark Materials*, to allow the existence of the real world. The purpose to such worlds is take our ordinary lives and put something new and impossible within them, to add some spice to the mundane, if you will. 'High fantasy' is an entirely new world with magic systems, languages, races and physical laws that have no knowledge of our own world. The vast majority of fantasy I read can be classified as high, although I feel the need to add distinctions of my own for the purpose of this section.

I think of my own work as 'echoes' of the real world. 'Echo' fantasy is mostly a statement and observation of humanity at the moment, not what it was or what it will be. For example, the slowly dying Polis will hopefully remind the reader of environmentalism. I do not want to go to an entirely new universe, as I wish to remain close to 'Earth', where the reader will recognise the cultural artefacts I have replicated: The combined religious motifs, the middle-eastern feel to the setting, environmentalism, fundamentalist zealotry, subverted corporations. Even the recognised zombies and vampires make an altered appearance, though the 'vampires' do not appear within the submitted section. I do not have allegorical similarities as Martin does with his women's rights opinions, though I am certain someone could read the Spanish Inquisition into the Seekers, or Nikolai Tesla into Sarra's character, if they were determined to do so. I am certainly powerless to stop them once this book is out of my hands. I am certainly not attempting to create a narrative similar to Israel vs. Palestine with *Further In* vs. the refugees. My interest in the Jews and refugees is intended to echo events of 3000 years ago, not the last seventy years in Gaza. I am not seeking controversy. I must also be careful to avoid satire as Pratchett writes in his *Discworld*, or the bombastic libertarian pontification Goodkind gives in *Stone of Tears*.

To explain my 'echoes' sub-genre more directly, I give here an explanation of my intent, later in the series. In a later 'episode' of *FireWall* I intend to provide economic commentary mirroring what is happening globally in the wake of the global financial crisis and the responses to it, such as Occupy Wall Street. By the end of (the entire, unsubmitted) *FireWall*, my characters begin to develop new technologies to cope with changing times, and these technologies can be considered 'echoes' of the dot-com bust, the robotic revolution

(driverless cars, computer programmes writing news stories, etc...) and social media. The point I will be trying to make is that society is forever changing, and as such there will always be disadvantaged and angry people on both ends of the financial/transactional process.

My Fictional Strategy

More than once, I have heard it is best to attempt showing or telling your worldbuilding within the first three pages, so the story can then get underway. While this is indeed an attractive idea, were I to world-build everything at the start, I worry that half the book would be complete before I could begin storytelling. Therefore, as I wrote *FireWall*, I chose to do the opposite and world-build as I wrote. Therefore, the first four chapters (including the prologue) serve as an attempt at combining world building and plot/character development. Long gone are the days where readers accept their world-building up-front, as David Eddings built in his prologue to *Pawn of Prophecy*. These days, such ‘front-loading’ is considered lazy, though I have retained ‘info-snippets’ (as opposed to info-dumps) in a manner similar to Robin Hobb’s *Assassin’s Apprentice*.

Dune is a good example of the narrative speed I hope I attempt to emulate. It is high (‘time machine’) fantasy with a blend of science fiction, slow narrative, thoughts in italics, and very removed from the recognisability of our own society. Peers, mentors and advisors have commented that my work feels much like science fiction, given that I attempted to make my ‘magic’ system logical. Also similar to *Dune*, the line between my fantasy and science-fiction is not distinct. Similarly to Gibson’s *Neuromancer*, *FireWall* is not an easy read, there are many future-esque technology concepts within it, and humanity’s relationship with matter has changed.

Fantasy and science fiction always want to push the boundaries and do something new. Gibson was probably the first ‘cyber-punk’ author, and my advisors have suggested I may have come close to ‘cyber-fantasy’ with *FireWall*, for the reason that my technology does not rely on magic, it merely *seems* to. The powers are all connected at a place where science-fiction and fantasy meet. Similarly to *Dune*.

My greatest difficulty and challenge in *FireWall* has been to describe a new type of setting I have not seen done before. The reader is not certain exactly what is going on, and I am not yet certain how to show them to the best of my ability and their better comfort. We both require some more hand-holding until I feel I’ve got a better grip on this whole writing thing.

Writing Style and Narrative Structure

I spent much of 2012 researching monotheistic religions and worldbuilding. I had some general ideas for how I wanted my story, but what you see before you, storywise, is utterly different to what I first envisioned for my novel. For instance, I only came up with the title *FireWall* in mid-2013. The reason is that I am a ‘gardener’, who immerses himself in his world to see what happens, rather than a ‘planner’, who knows what he is doing from step one.

In places, threaded through the novel, I use a mystery, first-person narrator. It becomes clear who this person is as we make our way through the subsequent episodes, but I use him as a way to hopefully ground the reader a little more in my novel. I also use a prologue and epilogue set in the native land of the five main characters, through the perspective of an antagonist to my main character, Tressa. Through his eyes we are able to see how she and her mission have grown and progressed by the end (submitted in my Postscript), and loudly hinted at the potential journey of secondary characters once this book concludes. My chosen point of view is limited third person. I find this perspective to be the most effective in fantasy for the reason that fantasy novels are effectively supernatural mystery novels, and this is effective as different people view different events.

I find the limited amount of knowledge each character carries in third-limited the best to develop character and mysteries. I have read many fantasy novels in first person perspective, like Rothfuss’ *Wise Man’s Fear*, but find that they are difficult to show perspective outside the main character. For my novel, with four narrative characters, third person subjective works best.

Potential Audience

Simply put, *FireWall* is intended for readers of fantasy fiction. Specifically, Epic, or High fantasy, as well as non-Grimdark. I have seen claims it is difficult to have teenagers read books that don’t have other teenagers in them, and that if I pander to them by placing a teenaged character who is ‘ordinary but special’ I will arouse their interest. I don’t believe this, and for this reason I cast my four male leads at twenty years of age at the start of the novel, to avoid the teenager trope. Sarra is a teenager, however, though this was more a necessity of plot rather than an attempt to placate the gallery. I hope the draw card for these readers will be novel worldbuilding, rounded characters and a compelling narrative.

Conclusion

Required Improvements

What to do once I complete 'FireWall 1: Seeker'? (This is the title of the novel in my head, should I self-publish as I envision).

- I know the first four chapters including the prologue are weaker than I would like, as they are my 'world-building chapters', and I need to continue developing and improving them.
- Develop the prose. I have read every word and sentence of *FireWall* until I feel I can no longer improve them. I need a break from the section I have submitted so I am able to return to the prose and further refine the character of my language.
- Invest the readers in the characters further. Specifically the male characters. My dilemma is that I am concerned about an excessive word count, should I develop my characters to where I wish them to be.

Ideal Reception for FireWall

I wish for my readers to read the first four sections of *FireWall* and think two things. First, the novel was different and interesting at the same time. Second, that it was uplifting without being simplistic or overtly didactic. I wish for a complete hero's journey for my main character Tressa, whilst introducing the setting and the five other characters who will continue the *FireWall* series after part four.

I hope, having read the novel, readers will agree with my unspoken premise that a fantasy novel does not need to be Grimdark to have realism. That it is not impossible for 'good' to triumph, even though we humans are indeed the sources of our own misery, and that only we can bring about better futures if we wish to. That the far future not need be grim darkness, but a world of our making and choosing that is complex and where there are no easy answers, but where the people grow to live in peace and harmony by their own free will.

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Glossary

Centre, The – Universally considered the focal point of the Polis, where the Royalty reside and operate Polis. Not every Polis has its centre literally at the centre, but most do.

Chaos – The energy produced and used by the Enemy, dark mechanisms and dark artefacts. Has a wide variety of detrimental effects upon the world and humanity. Primarily noticed in cadver concentrations.

Currency – An energetic medium used worldwide for the regulation of commerce and trade. Degrades and fades over time in specifically designed ‘currency holders’, produced and distributed by the Royalty.

Cadvers – The half-dead remnants of humans who have been infected with *chaos* in a manner that is yet not understood. Craving chaos to exists, they are beasts the Seekers have taken vows to hunt and kill over the last five thousand years.

Chapterhouses – Ancient Seeker fortresses developed atop older temples around the world.

Electricity – Source of energy used mostly in mechanisms. Produced by metallic friction and stored in ‘batteries’.

Enemy, The – The source of evil, unmaker of order, despiser of family and of love. Creator of *chaos*.

Escapers – A political group extant in all Polis, loosely based around the notion that our inherited understanding of history is a lie, and that Polis is not what the stories, religions and sciences say. So named for their desire for the abandonment of all the world’s Polis.

Examiners – The local law enforcement of Armer, devoted exclusively to maintaining order and carrying out justice. They often clash with the Seekers over matters of jurisdiction.

Founding – The establishment of the twenty-three Polis, five thousand years ago, after the victory over the Enemy during the Founder’s War. During this period the Polis were created, the Common Speech and writing was developed, and the inter-Polis charter of conduct was signed.

Hexagons – Unique to Sumad, the hexagons make Polis Sumad inhabitable by accelerating regular plant growth around three times as fast as normal. Polis can choose to stop one working or not, at His discretion.

Pipes – Sumad. Also called Fountains or Reservoirs, the piping system that hydrates the Polis is thought to be fed by an aquifer far underground that Polis alone controls.

Polis – The physical form of the twenty-three gods (including Polis Ceneph) who chose to remain on Earth at the time of the Founding. They are roughly circular landmasses around 100 kilometres in diameter that cater for the needs of the citizenry who live within. All Polis differ from one another in religious observation, location, layout, political system and mode

of function. E.g. Armer has specially maintained buildings that fall apart if Polis deems it necessary, to complement the abundant fertility of the geographic area. Sumad has farm hexagons to counter the generally infertile environment.

Quarter Guard – Armer. The penal martial organization used by Examiners and Seekers for assistance in their duties. Members are drawn from those serving indenture for their crimes, their families' crimes or as advance payment for a social service, such as retirement allowance or apprenticeships.

Roar, The – The universal term for the sound created by Polis when He Swallows a piece of land. The exact source of this sound is unknown.

Seekers – An ancient martial assemblage, established worldwide for the purpose of seeking and destroying *chaos* and all forms in which it manifests. They are answerable to the Royalty and none other, usually maintaining a fractious relationship with local law enforcement authorities. Seekers are headquartered in ancient fortresses named chapterhouses, which are almost as old as the organization itself.

Shockpole – The traditional Seeker weapon used to subdue infected and cadvers, using a combination of *vibrations* and *electricity*.

Street Keepers – The latest organization in a long line of agitators of the Seekers, devoted to protecting the peace. They are considered religious extremists and sharply execute their interpretation of Polis' justice.

Stones – Universally implied to mean the objects pushed to the surface by Polis by which humanity may store specific weavings of *vibration* and simple *vibration* energy. There is no uniform size, shape, colour nor storage capacity between stones.

Swallowing – When a Polis feels the touch of evil, or *chaos*, has grown too strong upon a place, He destroys it by consuming the affected land from below. The objects, usually tainted by *chaos*, are destroyed inside the Swallowing in an unknown method.

Vibrations – The energy inherent within most of creation, and shaped and utilised by vibration weavers for works of technology. Many mechanisms use *vibrations* in a simplistic manner and all artefacts use it in high complexity and concentration. *Vibrations* are present in *golem* but it is unknown in what capacity or concentration.

Walls – In Sumad, the structures developed by the Cenephan refugees to shelter from cadvers and local predators. Some encase farm hexagons, others pipes, some encase nothing at all. A Wall can be considered as akin to a clan or extended family group with all the loyalties expected therein.