**Writing Excuses**

# Season 2 Episode 1 Q&A At Mountain Con with John Brown

What is the perfect relationship between character and setting?

* Brandon: I would say that the perfect setting character relationship has to do with conflict. It's really all about the conflict, setting is only as interesting as its effect on the characters, look for conflict. Put the character in conflict with the setting. Make the character in contrast.
* Dan: Description of using an outsider because insiders wouldn't give the reader the right viewpoint. Look at the purpose to decide whether to use insiders or outsiders.
* Howard: You can't have the setting drive the plot. You can have the setting result in events which result in characters making decisions that drive the plot. It has to be character driven or we will get bored.

How do you provide visual details?

* John Brown: I don't think you always need setting some stories it doesn't matter. If it's important to the story and it jazzes you, that's the time when you put it in.
* Brandon: A lot of people read for setting detail, for a sense of wonder.
* Dan: Getting around to answering the question, the Runelord series by David Farland has a lot of rich detail. I've talked to him about this, and he keeps reference books nearby. So when he starts to write about a character, he opens a reference book, flips to a picture, and describes them. So one answer is to keep visual reference books available.
* Brandon: I think we've said before that one approach is to overstate something unimportant and understate something important.

Do characters ever deviate from the plot plan that you planned for them?

* John: it happens all the time. I have a couple of responses. One is that I'm bored with the story. I'm going to take it somewhere else, where do I need to go? If this character has hijacked my story, what they are doing is clearly more interesting than everything else that I had planned. So follow the character, let's do take 2, and see where this character takes us. Another way -- whatever is going on, I need to change it so it is interesting to me. I'll go back and invent let me fix it. Last point -- I love it when this happens. I'm doing things that are surprising to myself. But that's part of the fun of writing.
* Howard: that is when I surprise myself. If I'm surprised, the readers will be surprised. So I'm going to keep it, I'm going to roll with it.
* Brandon: my characters don't surprise me. I don't think about it that way. I do have aha moments, when I realize I could do this instead of what I had planned. I do come up with better ways, so I need to do rewriting. But I'll often tell myself I'll fix it in post and just keep writing.
* Dan: I have two things to say about this. First I want to stress that so many writers are so obsessed with following their muse that they will follow it somewhere dumb. Sometimes you have to stop and smack your characters around. Tell them to follow the plot.

# Season 2 Episode 2 How to Write for Children with Brandon Mull

Brandon: We should define children. People think we're talking about picture books. But the publishing term goes up to 18. Picture books, chapter books, middle grade, young adult. Middle grades are four to eight, young adult is eighth grade up to the end of high school.

When you sit down to write do you think I'm writing for this age group?

* Brandon Mull: No matter what I'm writing, I have to target me, I have to write something I think is cool, but I keep the audience present in the back of my mind. As far as what I do include, the level of penetration on the thinking, I do a little lighter, I may make it more dialogue driven, more visually driven, kind of like they're watching a movie. Pull back on the violence, not real glory.
* Brandon: One difference between middle grade and young adult -- edited for content or not. Middle grade books are paid for and given to children by adults. Young adults buy it themselves. Young adult books are not edited for content.
* Mull: Another point is the age of your protagonist. When the point of view is a kid, the flavor is middle.
* Brandon: I don't think you have to dumb it down. Sometimes you have to write it more simplistically.
* Mull: I write the kid as a kid, and the adult as an adult. If the adults sound like adults, kids know what that sounds like. That's how they experience the world. I won't go out of my way to get hard vocab -- if I notice I'm starting to drop a lot of hard vocab, I'll try to pull back and say things a little bit simpler. But it's not about saying it dumb, kids are pretty smart. Try to write it pretty clear and not overload on the heavy vocab and that's it.
* Brandon: I actually don't even edit for vocabulary until the revision. The difference is I'm looking to write shorter cause I'm writing middle grades. Middle grades are shorter. I want my books to be snappy and quick. I'm writing one viewpoint instead of six or seven. So in that way I'm making it simpler. I'm not trying to make the plot any less complex, I'm not trying to make the characters any less complex, I'm not trying to make dialogue any less complex. At the same time I am trying to write for the audience.
* Dan: My daughter is seven years old, and she just recently read some fairy and the berry battle book. The plot is about misunderstandings being escalated to the point of war -- that's really a big idea. She loved it because they didn't dumb it down. They put it in terms she understood, with fairies and hamsters throwing berries at each other

How do you write children's dialogue?

* Mull: That voice is still alive in me. It's partly instinctual. I remember how kids bicker. I remember how they simplify things. And I remember their emotional volatility.
* Dan: I make them less self-aware. Others are emotional, driven by the moment.
* Brandon: One of the best ways is to consider conflicts that kids will find interesting. What are they interested in?
* Mull: I do try to keep in mind what I liked to see in a book as a kid, but what kids want to know is what monsters are in the book, what creatures are in Fablehaven. Oh yeah -- make sure there are cool creatures in there, make sure something blows up, make sure somebody gets punched in the face. Make sure cool dumb stuff happens.

One thing I've heard a lot is that people will write a young adult book or adult book and send it in, then it gets packaged differently. How can we keep it on age?

* Mull: In young adult, you're gonna get a lot more internal dialogue, a lot deeper penetration into the characters mind. If the viewpoint of the character is all brooding about themselves and how others perceive them and their feelings and reactions to the scene more than what's going on in the scene -- that's going to feel more young adult. And if it isn't quite so heavy heavy introspective, if the scenes are more dramatized like you're watching a movie, that's middle grades.
* Brandon: If we're talking about the difference between young adult and middle grade, middle grades are not focused on romance. You may have hints but they're not as interested. Young adult -- teenagers -- what were you interested in? Romance. it's a kind of adventure story
* Howard: He has an alliance with an attractive, capable girl and there's no romance? Middle grade.

Why do you write for children? What do you gain, what are the benefits?

* Brandon: The reason I write for kids, the main thing being, the wonderful thing about children's genre, is that it's not divided by genre. It's actually divided by age group. What that means is on the shelf your science fiction books, your fantasy books, your realistic books, your mysteries are all shelved next to each other. What that gains you is the ability to genre bust like there's no tomorrow. It doesn't matter. In sci-fi and fantasy, if you're going to genre bust, you have to do it very carefully and it can get you in trouble and it can make your book hard to sell. In children's writing, you write for the age group. The other reason is that children are more accepting. Epic fantasy [skip proclamation of devotion] the story has to be very consistent. There is a solemnity to it. the world is serious, it takes itself seriously. For adults, it has to be a humor book. For kids, it can be a book that is humorous.

# Season 2 Episode 3 Characters with Brandon Mull

How do you go about creating characters that feel real when you don’t have experience? For example, I’ve never been a 12 year old girl. How do you create characters that are very different from yourself?

* Brandon Mull: I try to fake how a 13-year-old girl would talk. That's sort of like the simple answer, but it truly does have to do with being a good observer. Trying to pay attention to how these different types of people would talk. If you don't feel like you have your finger on the pulse of how a certain kind of person would be, maybe don't make them a character.
* Brandon: Or at least a viewpoint character.
* Howard: For some kinds of characters, the easiest way to go about it is to emerge yourself in their culture. Want to learn about how old people talk? Sit down and talk to some old people.
* Dan: I have tried to write a female protagonist before and I was horrible at it. I want to try it again soon but it didn't work at all for me. One thing that did work very well for me was writing a sociopathic main character. Primarily because that comes with a pre-packaged psychology. The entire American Psychiatric Association is handing me a character sketch in the form of massive books. So if you're going to write about a sociopath, then this and this and this are all going to be true, and that will inform how they act and that will inform what they do. And that makes it very easy.
* Mull: And a big part of it, too, is that everyone is a person. Everyone is a human being. And everybody has their own personality quirks. So figure out this 12-year-old girl. What are her personality quirks? What does she want? Is she cautious or is she daring? Figure those things out. Those kinds of questions are how you bring any character to life.
* Brandon: I often get this question myself because Mistborn is about a 16-year-old girl. The primary viewpoint protagonist of the trilogy. I've had lots of praise for that. What people don't see is the first few books I wrote where I failed miserably. What did I learn? One of the problems I was having with writing the opposite gender was that I was including them in a book simply for the purpose of having a romantic interest. Then when I got into their viewpoint, they felt flat as a character because I had not developed them to be their own person. They were developed to be trophy characters. And when I started to say to myself what is important to this character that isn't important to others, what character conflicts does this character have that would not bother anyone else. Find conflict, find the driving motivation.
* Dan: when you sit down to write a character, put it in terms that you are familiar with. If you've never been a 12-year-old girl, yeah, but you have been scared, or you have been adventurous, or you have been whatever something that you do understand. Give that person those human qualities that do make them relatable to you and then you'll be able to write it much better.

How do you develop character quirks that come across as realistic and story appropriate?

* Brandon: When I'm building character quirks -- you know story appropriate is a good question because I'm looking for stuff that ties in honestly to the conflict and to the setting. I'm looking for quirks that in some way can tie into other parts of the story. Not all of them have to be. But it's more useful if you're going to have a quirk. If you're going to have a shy character, if their character is shy, if the plot is going to require them to do things that make them.
* Howard: I've got lots and lots of characters, and in many ways I define them for myself by quirks that I know they have got. If their quirks, if their goals, if their objectives -- if the things that make them real characters to me aren't central to the story that's currently being told, they don't get the spotlight for that story.
* Brandon: Think about Monk the character. This is the OCD investigator. He's got this obsessive-compulsive disorder. The reason it works so brilliantly for a character quirk is that it keeps interfering -- it keeps being present all the time. I've had problems sometimes where I've given a character a character quirk and I never remember that they have it and my readers don't either because it's not important to what's going on and so it makes them forgettable as a character and it makes the quirk forgettable.
* Mull: Which leads into one thing, that if the quirk is there -- or if the personality trait is there -- it sometimes helps to make it a little bit extreme, a little more extreme than it might even be in a real person, because it's not a real person. It's an illusion, it's words on a page, and sometimes making that illusion a little bit extreme helps it feel a little more real even though that's kinda counterintuitive.
* Brandon: One of your character quirks is the kid that carries around a backpack. I love that quirk. What did you call it? His adventure pack? It's like his bat belt, but with kids stuff. And it works great because he gets in trouble and he's like, well, I got a flashlight in here. Nothing big, not saving the day. It works well for a character quirk. It doesn't become a plot focus, but we remember it because he's always got it with him. He might have duct tape.
* Dan: From my perspective writing horror, one of the things I'm always trying to do is make things disturbing, make them spooky, and so when I was looking for quirks to give to my main character, I thought what does he do for fun, well, how about he cooks. That was in the first book, but nobody cared because I didn't make it interesting. In the second book, I said well let's make this really spooky by saying that he doesn't cook meat because it reminds him of human flesh and all of a sudden that made him creepy and that made that quirk a lot more interesting.

Do you have any suggestions for avoiding character traps -- stereotypes such as the overlord, the farm hero, etc. who are all the same?

* Brandon: The best advice I ever got on this was from our friend David Wolverton/David Farland and he said when you're designing a place for a character for a plot, ask yourself why can't this character fill this role? If you're developing a heroic lead, asking yourself why can't they, why can't they? And that will give you these quirks and these handicaps and things. You're not trying to design the perfect character for that slot in the story, you're trying to design the imperfect character who is interesting in that slot in the story.
* Howard: I think the cliches that you're more likely to fall into are the villain and super villain cliches. Because we've seen that so many times. Sometimes it works. Sometimes you can tackle it in a new way. Take the trope and say why do people keep writing this. There's got to be a reason even though it often gets them in trouble and here it is. Look at it from a new angle and now it's not a trope and people will accuse you of being original.
* Brandon: Strange attractor. Best ideas are those that are both familiar and strange at the same time. Something familiar mixed with something new. The preserve for magical creatures is an excellent example. A wildlife preserve -- we all know what a wildlife preserve is -- for magical creatures -- boom! Strange attractor. Doing that for characters -- it's this character that you are familiar with done this new way. But if too many people have done it that new way, then it becomes the familiar and you're going to need something new as well.
* Dan: In some cases, this can be as simple as just replacing the farm boy was something else -- the baker's assistant. A simple change, just swapping something out for something else. But if you really force yourself to think how would a baker's assistant go about this, how would they react, how would they have been raised differently, then that can give you enough of a twist on the old saw that you can make it work.

I've read some script writing books that talk a lot about the three act structure. Do you think that's relevant or helpful for fiction? Maybe for short fiction?

* Howard: Short answer: yes. Long answer: yes, but don't be a slave to it.
* Howard: There's a dozen different ways you can approach this. The way I approach it is:  
  Act One: your protagonist is presented with a problem that he's actually reasonably competent at solving, and sets out to solve it. By the end of act one, it looks like we're close to a solution.  
  In Act Two, we discover that the problem is not the real problem -- it goes beyond that, and the protagonist is shown to be completely out of his or her depth. That's where you get your catastrophe and your big dark -- that's where things are darkest. And then in Act Three, things start to come together. The problems are still every bit as bad as before, but the protagonist has actually stepped up, has found a way around his weaknesses. Climax, resolution, roll credits.
* Mull: I think of it in a simple way that someone once explained to me, and that's Act One get your character up a tree, Act Two throw stones at him, Act Three get him down. As far as speaking of it super simply, you've got characters and you gotta get them in trouble and the trouble has to get thicker and they're doomed and they have to figure something out to their success or failure.
* Dan: I work with a lot of authors in Nanowrimo -- That's National Novel Writing Month. A lot of that time -- I hear this constantly -- they will finish their book early. They're like I thought this was going to be huge but I'm done after like 90 pages. Usually that's because they're not using a three act structure, they're making it too easy to solve their problem. The way I always go about this is try-fail cycles. You have to try and fail at the least twice before they can actually succeed.
* Brandon: I don't think in three act format. I analyze in three acts, but I don't think that way. I do look for try-fail cycles, but I'm not a slave to it. I'm trying to write a really great story, and things do have to get worse before they get better.
* Howard: When you say you analyze in three acts, when the editor takes it back to you for the first rewrite.
* Brandon: No. When the book is done, then I can say here's act one, here's act two, and here's act three. I never think in three acts when I'm writing partially because I'm writing books that are 250,000 words long. In that case I can't break it down into three acts. I have to break it down into 12 or 15. I've got lots of different acts. I'm writing for each little character. I am sometimes writing here is a problem, here's them struggling with the problem, here's their resolution. And I'm doing that but I'm not doing it all the time for the whole book because I've got so many different cycles of people going through for all these different things. In the Wheel of Time, I'm writing a 700,000 word book and in that case I'm not looking at three acts. I'm looking at everyone being divided down to multiple little chunks. And often times I'll have a character go through an entire plot structure of three acts and then start a new one in the same book. Or do three groups of three acts. I think it's a good tool to be aware of, but as always, do what works best for you. Try different things. Being bound too rigidly doesn't work for me.

# Season 2 Episode 4 Viewpoints, Plot Twists, Etc.

Many of us are working full-time in other jobs while trying to break out as a writer. What advice do you have for balancing work, writing, and the other necessities of life?

* Eric James Stone: Set aside some time to write each day and try to do that. Spending some time each day to write was how I got a lot done.
* Dan: First of all, you cannot do anything professional in your spare time. If you want to do this for real, don't wait for spare time. You have to set aside real time and treat it like a job. Beyond that you really just have to commit yourself to it.
* Howard: I have to tell you that the four years that I spent at Novell while doing Schlock Mercenary seven days a week. The way I described it in one lecture that I gave was that those are four years with my family that I'm never getting back. Those were very very expensive for me. At the end of that four years, I had to quit the day job. Not because the cartooning was making any money -- at that point, it had only made negative $600 for the year and that was September. But I had to quit the day job because I was gonna die. It was awful. I was working 100 hours a week pretty much every week between Novell and the cartooning. And so strike a balance -- find a balance that keeps you sane and allows you to spend time with people you love. As much as I like being a professional cartoonist, what it has taught me is that the time I spend with my family is far more valuable than the time I spend cartooning. The only reason I get to be a cartoonist is that it helps me be with my family. If it didn't, I wouldn't.
* Eric: One more thing, you're probably gonna have to give something up. When I decided I wanted to write seriously, I had to give up playing EverQuest.
* Dan: The big secret here is that there really isn't a secret. There's not a magical trick we can tell you other than it's gonna be hard but you have to do it anyway. You've gotta put in the time, sorry to depress you.

When you are writing without professional involvement or supervision, do you set yourself deadlines?

* Howard: Yes. Yes. Absolutely.
* Brandon: I can sound off on this one because I've been doing this full-time for quite a while. In fact my day job was working a graveyard shift at a hotel, my night job, which is also just me having free time and writing. And so ever since the beginning I've kind of been writing full time. There was a TV there at the hotel desk that I could've watched. I had my computer that had video games on it and things like that. You have to learn -- you can go and do whatever you want, but you won't get your writing done. I could go play Halo all day if I wanted to.
* Howard: I had someone cancel on me today. I was going to go do an interview in Salt Lake City on my way up here. So I found myself with three or four free hours. I looked at that free time and I thought, I set myself a deadline for myself this week that I didn't meet. I was going to get a week of comics inked above my usual week of comics. So I told myself I have four hours starting right now. Okay. Go. I went, hit the deadline, and then came to Mountain con.
* Brandon: What I do is I say to myself I have to write 10 pages. I can do whatever I want when I get those 10 pages written. Now what I'll probably want to do because I'll have gotten into it enough is want to keep going if I have more time because getting started is the hard part. But I'll give myself that motivation and I'll say I've got to do 10 pages today and once I do 10 pages I can go play Halo or things like this. That works very well for me. Dangling the carrot has always worked very well for me. If I get this done by this time, then I can go watch this television show that I want to. I've been doing that for years. I actually... I turn in books ahead of deadlines, usually by about a year. I've been a year ahead on everything up until the Wheel of Time thing when they dumped it in my lap and said okay you've got a few months how fast can you get it to us? But I can only do that because on all of my other contracts I was a year or two ahead. I write every day, that's what I do. I'm a writer.

Most writers have full-time employment and other commitments. In a finite amount of available time, what proportion of reading to writing do you recommend?

* Brandon: This is actually a great question because it is very hard to find reading time. It's been surprising to me how hard it is to find time to read. Partially because writing gives me the same feel that reading used to, but it's kind of like a little bit of a higher buzz for me. It's working the same muscles, yet if I never read, I don't know what's going on in the field, and I'm not generating ideas as well. I generate a lot of ideas from reading. Reading nonfiction or reading other fantasy books and seeing what they did and saying wow I wish they would have done this and saying well I can. So how do you balance that is a great question. I read most of the time when I can't be writing -- if I'm on a plane, I take a book.

How do you develop plot twists and what makes them effective?

* Eric: Basically most of the time I have to think about how it's going to end before I can write the story, but when I'm writing the story, I often come up with a plot twist because I'm seeing aspects of the story that I haven't seen before. So I don't necessarily have the plot twist in mind as I begin writing the story, but the twist is something that comes in the writing.
* Brandon: One thing you really want to ask on a plot twist is why are you including a plot twist? It's gonna sound strange coming from me because I like really cool plot twists in my books, but a plot twist should never be there -- in my opinion -- just to twist the plot. What I'm talking about... I've seen movies and TV shows before where I think they're writing along and they say you know this isn't interesting enough, let's plot twist. And then they'll have one of the characters turn out to be evil. And I hate it. Because it doesn't feel like it's right for the story -- they're twisting for the twist, not for the sense of... Smacking them upside the head and then having them say I didn't expect that, but it was so awesome. That's a good enough reason to have a plot twist. A good enough reason to keep the reader interested. But just to say Boom we're twisting right now -- it doesn't work and I hate it.
* Howard: But if you're going to write... so if you're a discovery writer and you're writing and you say ah I need a plot twist Boom -- when you go back and do the rewrite, you look at the plot twist and say, well, okay, that's kind of obvious that I just stuck that in there -- now I'm gonna go back and I'm going to foreshadow this. This character who turned out to be evil, I'm going to point out in act one that he has a monobrow or an eye patch. I don't know how you foreshadow these things. I draw them with a monobrow or an eye patch.
* Brandon: I did it. I had a character twist recently in one of the books I wrote. The way I did it was through humor. This person made lots of really violent jokes -- said lots of violent things and then would make them into jokes, would laugh about it. When you go back and look at him you're like wow, this guy is a psychopath. But the viewpoint character was seeing it and I was painting it as he's just a funny guy. So when it twists, the reader will say, oh wow, he was serious the whole time, that's creepy. So I think it's smoke and mirrors. The way you make plot twists work is smoke and mirrors, it's not the twist itself, it's what you put before it that makes it work.
* Dan: Yes. With plot twists, you have to make sure they are serving both purposes at once. They have to be surprising, but they have to fit what you've done. It has to work two ways.

How do you self describe a character within their viewpoint?

* Brandon: It's good to ask that because the cliche you probably want to avoid ever including is the looking in the mirror because it's been done so many times. There are a lot of editors that if in the first chapter the character describes himself by looking at a mirror they get mad at you. That's not to say you can't do it, but it's part of the cliche of the genre. So how do you do it without doing it that way?
* Brandon: It is rough. For instance often times I will have... you have a character brush their hair. Well you can describe how annoyed they are with how many snarls there are in their hair because it is so long. Or how good this person is at having their braids done and how they wish their braids looked like that. What you're wanting to do... if you can make it about character at the same time as you're describing them, then it's a sneaky trick to get it in. It's the same way you do all these things, you do sneaky tricks. So if you want to describe that someone is kind of heavy, then you make them puffing as they go up a few stairs, and say, "you know, I really need to lose a few pounds." That works. We sneak these things in this way. You have them take a drink, and the suds gets in their mustache and their beard. So they have got a mustache or beard. Some of these things, if you're really sneaky, you can work them in and it works really well.
* Brandon: I do in first-person (describe my characters). In third person, I try to get away with sneaky tricks.

# Season 2 Episode 5 Writing Groups

How do you find a writing group?

* Dan: I found mine the same way you found yours. Which was we were in college together and we both worked on a science fiction magazine and we were both in the same science fiction writing class and at some point we both realized oh hey we were both interested in this and we talked and we both wanted to write novels and we formed a writing group together.
* Brandon: A lot of people ask me, "how do I start a writing group, how do I do it?" I'm always kind of baffled by this question because it's always been natural for me. It's just been -- I hang out with people -- I know a lot of people who are interested in writing. I get the sense from people who ask this question that they don't know a lot of writers.
* Dan: It's like you said -- you already were hanging out with writers. So that's the first suggestion -- hang out -- find -- write -- local clubs -- if there's a magazine you can join in a college, do that.
* Howard: I cannot emphasize enough how important the local fan community is. I had no connections with anybody locally. I'd been cartooning for five years before I finally got a hold of somebody who was running LTUE and that one contact cascaded into -- well, I met Brandon and I met Dan and I met 30 or 40 other people who are all local professionals and it all came about as starting to attend those conventions.
* Brandon: Yeah, go to the conventions. It's going to take trial and error. Sometimes you are going to end up in a writing group with people that you don't want to be in a writing group with. But it's going to take effort and time. And you are going to have to try some and you know they'll fall apart or you'll end up just conflicting with people in the group. It will just take work.
* Dan: We have to point out -- most cities of fairly large size have writing organizations already built. I just discovered last year that there is a league of Utah writers.
* Barnes & Noble has lots of writing groups and book clubs. Bookstores often do. A lot of the independent bookstores will have these too.
* Dan: Libraries will as well. Getting into a reading club is also a great way to find a writing group.
* Howard: Dragon's Keep has hosted in the past a National Novel Writing Month group once a week.
* Brandon: Oh yeah. Nanowrimo is a great way to meet writers.
* Dan: It's a fabulous way. They have their forum completely split down into states, and each of those states is split into communities. Sign up for that and within a week or so you will be contacted by local writers

How do you make a writing group work for you?

* Brandon: There are distinct ways -- things you can do. When in a writing group, you're either workshopping someone else's piece or your piece is being workshopped. Let's take it first in your piece is being workshopped -- how do you make it effective for you as a writer when your piece is being workshopped?
* Dan: I'm going to say -- when your thing is being workshopped, shut up. You sit, you don't talk. If you start to defend your work while others are critiquing it, you will get into arguments, and it will be a useless writing group.
* Howard: The other thing to keep in mind in that regard is that if you've written something and it can't defend itself without you saying stuff, it's broken and it needs to be fixed.
* Brandon: It tells you something. This is so hard to do, but I think it's the number one point I would make to anyone who wants to do a writing group is when you're being workshopped, say as little as possible.
* Howard: It's also the hardest thing to do.
* Brandon: It's really hard. It'll drive you crazy. You want to explain to everyone how you really are brilliant. You want to say all I'm going to explain that later on. I did think of that, I'm not an idiot. But you know what, everything that someone says tells you something. If they are wondering about something that you have explained later on, then you've done the right way. You raised questions in your readers and that's perfect, that's what you want. If they're confused by something then that tells you I need to fix this or maybe that's a confusion you want. You are doing market research. You are like the person showing the commercial to a bunch of people who want to try the product and what you don't want to do is get up afterwards and say well the commercial was really bad but this is why you really should buy our product.
* Brandon: Take lots of notes. Say okay they were confused by this point, this point they didn't even notice so that means this, it looks like they picked up on my foreshadowing, it looks like I have a bad paragraph here. Take lots of notes.
* Dan: I will mention that it occasionally is very helpful and certainly allowable to ask questions. If they're getting to the end of your section and they haven't talked about this thing yet and you really want to know their reaction, go ahead and ask them. But don't say why didn't you understand this, that's not a good question.
* Brandon: you may even want to just wait until Act II, and say then, "do you remember the foreshadowing? Does this work for it?" If you say this gets explained in act two what you end up doing is letting them know that it's coming. And you then taint them for giving you comments on that for the future. And everything you say -- it's Heisenberg's law of writing groups -- whenever you interact with them, you are changing their reactions, the less you can interact with them, the better.
* Brandon: the more [you do]... you'll get very offensive and you'll want to argue and that will make people not want to give you feedback because they will feel that you don't accept their opinion -- that's another big problem with speaking.
* Howard: that can break the whole writing group as well. As soon as there's a feeling of contention in there, it all falls apart.

How can you be most effective in helping them workshop to make their piece better?

* Brandon: I'm going to say that you want to when you're workshopping someone's piece -- we often say this in my writing group -- it's prescriptive versus descriptive -- the more descriptive you can be, the better. Meaning say this is how I felt, this is how I reacted, rather than saying you should do this. Stephen King says he hates writing groups. I may be quoting this wrong -- he says it's because people tend to ruin his work. I think it's because Stephen King is a discovery writer. He sits down, puts people in situations, and starts writing, and if he shows chapters while he's writing it they'll give him all kinds of suggestions which will completely derail the book. You don't want to be giving too many suggestions. You want to be saying I was confused by this, I like this character, I don't like this character, rather than saying you should do this with this character, they should go to this place. If you can phrase it as I'm curious about this, that's better than saying do this.
* Dan: You have to realize that the author is the expert in their own work. So you just tell them your reactions to it -- this is what I thought at this point, this is how I reacted -- they can then decide how best to use that information.
* Brandon: The really good editors often do that. They say I've identified a problem, go for it. And you as a reader -- you'll be identifying things and honestly sometimes they are even problems. You just want to give reactions. Say good things too, say what's working. Writers need to hear this. It's what we forget a lot. In fact I think it's time -- I want to mention -- the Janissey philosophy of writing groups -- our friend Janissey -- is she here? She took off. She suggested and this has worked pretty well in one of my writing groups that you start with good things. And then after that, you talk about the things -- that people talk about what they thought were the most broken with the piece -- so they could talk about the large issues first. But you want to do is stay away from the sentence level issues that are going to get rewritten and reworked anyway so it's kind of like she says do three levels. Level III problems are problems that are so broken that you would put the book down and no longer read. There shouldn't hopefully be a lot of those. But we want people to be able to mention those and have time for those before we move on to other stuff. Then level II are problems that are pretty big problems that you had with the piece. Then level I are little issues, paragraph issues -- if we don't have time for them, so what?
* Howard: I like the idea of making sure that you are positive. That you identify -- call out the good things in the work you have been reading because writers -- interestingly enough for a group of people who create things and put them out to the mass market -- they have very, very fragile egos. And it's very, very difficult to receive criticism as we've talked about in this podcast. And you can soften that quite a bit by identifying the things that you like. Those become your good karma points for being able to point out the level III problem in the second chapter.
* Brandon: Well, it will really help them a lot to know what they're good at doing. I think early on when I was having readers read my books, it was very useful for me for them to constantly say to me Brandon, I love your magic system. That identified for me you know that I want to make this a hallmark of my style, I think it's something I'm really good at, let's emphasize this, let's do what I do well, and spend a lot of time on it. It was very useful to me when people said that.
* Dan: You know, one of the best comments I ever got in a writing group -- halfway through my second book in my horror trilogy, we sat down and said let's start Dan's good things. And our friend Ben said, "Dan, after reading this chapter, I never want to be alone in a room with you again." That's the best possible compliment you can give to a horror writer. I was delighted by that.

Writing Group Quirks

* Dan: This is one thing we have noticed. Our group does a chapter a week. One of the great things about that is it lets you drill down into a chapter and get a really great handle on it. One of the bad parts about it is that it means the writing group is reading your book over the course of about a year, usually, and that can mean that you foreshadow something early and they've completely forgotten it later. If they're waiting a week between each chapter, they're going to forget a lot of stuff, tension won't be building as well as it should be, and so there's a lot of the time when you get feedback you just have to say is this real or is this just the writing group quirk?
* Brandon: That's very important to realize. Sometimes writing groups don't give good feedback in that area. That's why it's good to have alpha readers too -- meaning people who read the whole book through -- and if you can address those specific questions at them when they're alpha reading -- you can say did you feel this, did you feel that this was foreshadowed well? I have a lot of problems with this in my writing group because I've had this -- books that we do one chapter a week -- and I've had 80 chapter books that I've workshopped and you don't go every week sometimes.
* Howard: It seems to me that the solution then for the person who's submitting things to the writing group is to submit their first few chapters and make sure that questions of style and character and voice and dialogue and whatnot -- setting -- get those addressed early and then take the book all to yourself and write most of the way through it and then get some alpha readers to help you out.
* Brandon: I almost always suggest if you can finish the whole book before you workshop it. Or do exactly what Howard just suggested -- I do this a lot -- write three chapters, workshop those three chapters, see what peoples impressions are, and then write the rest of the book. To not let it get derailed. You will have problems particularly with this quirk that if you're writing as it's going and workshopping it as it's going -- people are like oh you need to keep the tension up... ask for changes...
* Dan: I do want to point out though especially for early writers -- the biggest benefit for me when I started writing group as an incentive to write was that I knew I had to get a chapter done that week or my writing group would laugh at me. That's a really big thing and it can be a big incentive.
* Dan: We don't have a lot of time left, but one of the weird writing group quirks that I want to warn people about is people will often get hung up on one thing. Someone reading through the book normally would never think about this. But it'll happen all the time in a writing group. Some personal mention something while talking about your chapter and then the whole group will start to think about it and then the next week they'll start to think about it again and they'll blow it way out of proportion.
* Brandon: It happens a lot. It gets in the writing group unconscious that this issue is a big problem with the book even though it's not a plague you for...
* Howard: Time to take the book someplace else?
* Brandon: No. It'll happen in every writing group. You just have to be willing to understand and when people give you feedback... I take maybe a quarter of the suggestions. One out of four. One out of four suggestions works pretty well. You have to be willing to discard three out of four suggestions when you go to a writing group. Maybe two out of four. Just going to understand that you're looking for that one out of four that they say some, "I completely missed that. You're completely right. Oh my goodness, how did I miss that." And then you rewrite it.

# Season 2 Episode 6 Endings

How do you find a writing group?

* Howard: My philosophy on endings is that the ending needs to tie up everything with the bow except for those glaring loose pieces of string that are not in the bow that you are going to tie up later.
* Brandon: Dan, should all endings tie everything up with a bow?
* Dan: They shouldn't tie everything up. I'm a firm believer that endings should be kind of sad in addition to being kind of happy. I think that every ending ought to have an element of happiness in it somewhere -- unless you're writing a tragedy -- but it ought to be sad as well. Maybe that's because I'm a horror writer.
* Brandon: I agree too actually. I like my characters to keep on living. Now the thing in people's heads -- like after the story's done.
* Brandon: When I finish a book, I don't always know if I'm going to be writing a sequel. Elantris -- I'd like to someday, I don't know. So I want there to be some little loose ends that allow the characters to keep on living -- so that people can imagine what goes on with their lives. I don't want to tie everything up. But at the same time, I really like a whizbang ending that just kind of punches you in the face so you say, "I didn't see that coming, but it was so awesome that it's just wonderful."
* Brandon: I'm talking about the climactic ending followed by denouement. All of that together. My denouement are really short. I tend to do maybe one chapter -- that really feels like a half chapter -- a really short -- if there's any extra explanation I need to do or anything I need to say to get to the next book -- just zip there we go and we're out. So my endings are just a big avalanche followed by taking a deep breath and then we're done.
* Dan: well I think you said something really important when you said it should be a whizbang ending that they don't see coming. And we've talked about that when we've talked about plot twists in the past. But it really should be something that the reader loves but the reader didn't expect.
* Brandon: Here's the thing about endings. Surprisingly it's the last part of the book that people will read so really what it's going to do -- that's going to be the last flavor of the book that people will keep. And I think that honestly a lot of people -- particularly a lot of movies do this -- they skimp a little on the endings -- and books do this too. They'll work really hard on the beginnings and their middle -- they'll keep you interested -- and then the ending comes and it's just a little bit of a letdown after how good the middle was. I don't know -- maybe that's just me. For me, my philosophy on endings is it better be cool because the ending is my favorite part of a movie or book and it will make or break it for me if the ending isn't good -- it will undermine everything that's come before. If it's really, really good, it will rescue it.
* Howard: The ending is definitely what sells me on the next book. If the ending of the first book isn't good -- whether or not the next book is in the same series -- the next book by that author I'm not going to pick it up if I didn't like the ending.
* Brandon: You know, I think this happens to Shyamalan a lot because he's come to depend so much on his endings and he's built up his endings so much and then they tend to not -- none of them has been as good as his early ones -- particularly Sixth Sense -- I liked Unbreakable a lot too. But I thinks his endings since those two have not been as good -- and because of that, the ending falls flat, people walk out of the movie saying that was a terrible movie. When you look at the Village -- the Village is a brilliant movie. I think it has awesome directing, awesome performances from the characters, wonderful storytelling, with a really kind of pathetic ending. Because of that, a lot of people have a kind of bad taste in their mouth about the movie. So I guess what I'm getting on here is I think it's possible to focus on the ending too much.
* Howard: Oh, if you try -- if you oversell the ending -- and that's what Shyamalan suffers from, is overselling of that big Act III reveal. If you oversell it, then it's very unlikely that your movie or book is going to live up to that. I think rather than oversell the ending, focus on making the book really, really interesting. And then with your ending, you don't have to have a big reveal necessarily unless you're Shyamalan.
* Brandon: I can say this because I'm an English major -- not because I've won Romantic Times awards -- but I really like Jane Austen books. They're not surprising at all. Particularly since now I've read them so many times, but even if I were to read a new one -- you know what's going to happen, you know what's coming -- but they work. They work just fine. There's no Act III redefine the nature of the book. So if you can't pull off that really big twist ending, that's fine. You don't have to. When I say the ending can ruin a book for me, I think more often it's if you're trying too hard and not pulling it off.

So how can you not try too hard?

* Brandon: How do you keep from trying too hard? I'm going to answer my own question. I think the way to do this is to give your books to alpha readers, have writing groups, learn what you're good at doing -- and if you're not good at endings or if you don't want to have a big super surprise ending, realize you don't have to. You don't have to be anyone else other than who you are. You can write a really good book without a super huge explosive surprise ending. As long as it is satisfying. Fulfill your promises. And so if you're making the wrong promises, you'll have an unsatisfactory ending.
* Howard: That's what I meant at the beginning when I said try it all up with a bow -- the things that you foreshadowed, you need to go ahead and explore. If you plan on leaving something as a loose end it needs to not be the biggest, most scariest, gun hanging on the wall in the book because people are going to be disappointed.
* Dan: I wanted to talk about how sometimes when you're trying to get an ending to work... now I can't even remember how I was going to phrase this. But I was going to talk about the ending of Lord of the Rings or rather the climax with Frodo and the Ring -- which is, in my opinion, one of the best endings and it's because it is fulfilling all the expectations of the story but breaking all the expectations of the formula. You get to the end of that story and you expect Frodo to do exactly what we've been waiting for him to do for three books and instead he does exactly what the ring has been wanting him to do -- he falls.
* Brandon: I think that's how to surprise is to not do what people expect but at the same time fulfill the promises you've been building in the book.
* Dan: And most of the time when you are breaking the promises you make it's because you are trying to follow an external guide too closely. Your characters are making choices based on your plot outline or based on a genre formula rather than based on who they are. So just let them be who they are and more often than not your ending is going to feel not only more real but more surprising because people are expecting you to follow the formula.
* Howard: The author likes to think that he or she is in charge of the book but if you are really writing character driven fiction than by the time you get to Act III, these characters have their own voices, they have their own desires, they all believe themselves to be the heroes of their own story -- and whatever outline you may have created, if it doesn't take this into account -- if you stick to your outline it's gonna feel forced, and if you don't stick to your outline, you're going to be leaving bits out. You have to work very, very carefully.
* Brandon: You have to be willing to rewrite the outline. Character for me at least is always more important than following the outline. Now I don't let my characters... my characters... I don't let them do things I don't want them to -- but that's because I think I'm flexible enough to keep it changing.
* Howard: But do they do things that you weren't expecting?
* Brandon: They do -- all the time.
* Brandon: Saying some of these things might be surprising for people because I have said before I usually come up with my endings first and I do. I can't start a book until I know I have got a really good ending in my head -- it's just how I work. I have to be writing toward it. The thing is, you have to be willing to toss the really cool ending that you came up with out the window if you come up with something even cooler. And sometimes you'll be writing characters and the ending doesn't fit and you have to stop and change where you're going. I always do have my ending in mind when I start, but I don't always end up with the ending that I started with.
* Brandon: I posted the first draft and the sixth draft [of Warbreaker]. The ending I was writing for, I actually posted chapters as I was writing the book, so you can actually get chapters that were pointing at a slightly different ending if you just read the original chapters I posted. If you read the first draft, you'll see that I kind of ended up at one place. There were parts in the ending that just were broken, that didn't work. They were from the outline, and I had to be willing to just rewrite them. So by the time you get to the sixth draft, you can see the things I fixed. You know I've changed some things dramatically. Other things have remained exactly the same because they worked. They were perfect for the character. They came out exactly as I wanted them to be, we were good. But some things I had to just completely throw out the window.
* Dan: I did do that for book 2 and it's worked really well. It's the first book that I've written that I consider to be good that I didn't have to rewrite the ending five times. Even book one that I sold, I rewrote the ending to that one about five times to make it work.
* Brandon: I was involved and I saw the process. With book 2, did you change anything about the ending as you were writing or did you hit it nail on what you started with?
* Dan: I had to go back... the ending worked perfectly for me. What I did in the second draft was all changing the middle section so that the ending worked a little better.
* Brandon: And that is something you can do
* Howard: Retroactive foreshadowing
* Brandon: Retroactive foreshadowing. If your character doesn't fit your ending, either your ending needs to change or sometimes your characters need to change. Sometimes your characters will take on this great big life of their own, and they'll start going directions and you'll realize that's brilliant but this is completely wrong for the book. I need to take what that character has become, set them aside, use them in another book later on where they can really shine, and go back to the original concept for this character and see if I can take it in a different direction.
* Howard: Final words on endings. Per our discussion with Moshe, if your ending isn't good, but the rest of your book is fantastic, your editor can help you fix it, and it's okay, you can still be able to sell it. If your ending isn't good when the book goes to print, you've just killed your career.

# Season 2 Episode 7 Using Writing Formulas

* Howard: Well, speaking of Cask of Amontillado jokes -- okay, this seg's going to be kind of rough -- we're talking about formulas and when to use them. Dan, what am I talking about when I say formulas?
* Dan: Formula. You're talking about the basic patterns that show up in stories -- whether that's three act format, whether it's something like the Hero's Journey -- kind of a very wide general outline/guideline that a story is going to follow.
* Howard: Bob, when do we use formulas?
* Bob Defendi: Most all the time.
* Howard: On purpose?
* Bob: Not necessarily -- but a formula is a formula because it contains all the elements that we expect from a story. If you see a story, and you say, "wow that was really predictable," it might be because they flubbed some part of the formula.
* Howard: Okay, now I'm confused. Because if the formula contains the things that we expect, and you use the formula right, wouldn't that make the story predictable?
* Bob: I set that up well, didn't I?
* Howard: Dan, I think Bob is schooling us...
* Dan: And we just started
* Bob: You would think so, but one of the elements is surprise your reader. So if you skip that -- for instance in the three act structure, there's always a twist in the middle -- if you don't have the twist in the middle, the plot will seem very linear and by the time you get to the end everybody will say well you know it just kinda petered along where it started, nothing really surprised me, nothing really changed, nothing really challenged me...
* Dan: Now let's make the point clear here that when we are talking about formula we are not talking about cliches. And in a lot of cases, I think when something seems predictable, it's because they did the formula wrong and turned it into a cliche. And in many ways, that's what a cliche is, it's just a formula that's been done a million times the same way, or very poorly, or very unskillfully.
* Howard: So cliche is when you take the formula -- the formula is not farmboy saves the world -- the formula is -- unless I'm wrong -- that's the Hero's Journey. It's when you take that formula and say well gosh the hero has to come from humble beginnings and what could be more humble than a lowly farmboy...
* Bob: Exactly.
* Howard: And that's where you become a cliche.
* Dan: The Hero's Journey is what we English majors call an archetype -- it's something that's been around forever -- and you can find that Hero's Journey of the young -- whether it's young, or whether it's poor, or whether it's stupid -- whatever humble beginnings that the character starts from, they will overcome that and eventually defeat the bad guys. That is an archetype that has existed since time immemorial. Where it becomes a cliche is where it's a farmboy who does the same things that Luke Skywalker did and the same things that everyone else has done...
* Dan: The Hero's Journey is what we English majors call an archetype -- it's something that's been around forever -- and you can find that Hero's Journey of the young -- whether it's young, or whether it's poor, or whether it's stupid -- whatever humble beginnings that the character starts from, they will overcome that and eventually defeat the bad guys. That is an archetype that has existed since time immemorial. Where it becomes a cliche is where it's a farmboy who does the same things that Luke Skywalker did and the same things that everyone else has done...
* Howard: The pig keeper in the Horned King.
* Bob: Now let's give an example of taking that exact same formula and doing something really different. I'm listening to an audio book right now -- To the Mirror of Her Dreams by Donaldson. And it's a exact same story. She comes from a humble beginning but she's the daughter of a very, very rich man. She works a charity job because she doesn't need money. By all financial ratings, she is not from a humble beginning but she is so meek -- she has been convinced she is so worthless that she doesn't even really believe she exists. She has that low self-esteem. And that makes her an incredibly humble character. And so she is following -- I'm assuming, I'm not at the end of the book yet -- she's following that same kind of Hero's Journey growth through her story as the farmboy does but Donaldson kind of took it and turned it...
* Howard: It doesn't feel like a cliche. By the same token, you got Brandon's first book of the Mistborn trilogy. Vin is filling the humble character role -- and she's a thief -- a street rat -- and that's not cliche because we've only seen that done a couple of times. Aladdin is the example that comes to mind.
* Dan: But the big thing that keeps it from being a cliche is that he's following the formula in that here's this humble character but the surroundings are different -- it's a new setting.
* Howard: He's invented a new context and all that.
* Dan: the character has to do different things -- the character has different powers that she uses to solve different conflicts. So even though the formula for Mistborn is essentially the formula for Star Wars and the formula for Cinderella and the formula for anything else that uses the Hero's Journey, the trappings are completely different and that keeps it very fresh.
* Bob: I was just going to say Elantris -- you could make the same argument. The main character is a prince, but by the first sentence of chapter 1, he is in the most humble situation you can be in -- in that world.

Formulas

* Bob: Romance -- boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy gets girl back.
* Dan: There's one that I kind of think of as the two act format -- where the first half of the story, the heroes are reacting to the villain, and in the second half, they take the active hand and the villain starts reacting to them.
* Bob: Yes, yes. Because generally to make a story as interesting as possible, you want to make sure that the first thing that the hero tries to do to win, fails. And the second thing he tries to do to win, fails. And probably the third and forth depending on how long you are -- how long a story you're writing on if you're writing a short story or a novel -- and then finally when you reach the end of your word count then he succeeds -- that would be the try fail cycle. But the thing is -- an example that they give in the Writers of the Future -- I went to the Writers of the Future workshop a few years back -- they talk about A Man for All Seasons. The main character in there has to by the end of it decide that he would rather die than betray his honor -- but before he gets to that decision, he tries every single thing he can think of to get acquitted in that court case. He pulls every trick out of the book that he can until he finally gets to the point where it's like -- that's it, I have to either betray what I believe in and live or stick to it and die -- and that's the point he gets to. But he has a lot of try fails up to there.
* Dan: Bob mentioned the romance formula -- boy meets girl, loses girl, and then they get together again. I've heard this referred to a lot when it's done wrong as the idiot plot. The reason -- the difference between those -- boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy gets girl again -- that's an archetype that's been around forever. But you watch a really bad romantic comedy and they just feel like idiots. And the reason is that the plot is driving the characters rather than the other way around. I'm gonna say that applies to any formula, not just to the romance thing. If you feel like you have to force your characters to do something idiotic in order to make your story work, it's because you're trying to force them into a formula rather than letting the story flow naturally from them.

When should you consciously look at the formula and try to use it?

* Bob: I start looking at the structure very early when I'm writing. I have a four stage outlining process and it is stage 2 where I make sure that everything contains every story element that it needs to be a complete story. At that point in my plotting, I have it all broken out -- there's an overall story line, there's a romance storyline, there's a main character storyline, there's an impact character storyline -- all of these different storylines and I have to filter them together but I make sure that each one of them that I want to have a complete arc has a beginning, a middle, and an end, has try-fails, has everything that I want it to have before, you know, I basically shuffle them together like a deck of cards.
* Dan: I agree. For me, I start looking at formula and structure very, very early when I'm first outlining a book because later on when I actually am doing the writing or I'm working on the characters or the dialogue -- that's what I want the story to flow out of the characters instead of out of the formula. So getting that formula out of the way and using it as a skeleton, I can then deviate from it later on in whatever method works best rather than confining myself to it or taking a more organic story and trying to cram a formula on top of it later on.

How do you prevent yourself from sounding cliche?

* Bob: I like to steal my answer from Orson Scott Card. He says throw out your first idea because it's been done before. Throw out your second idea because it's been done before. And your third idea, which you think is really, really good -- probably been done before. Around your fourth or fifth idea, you start coming up with something that is different enough that it's going to surprise your audience.
* Dan: For my answer to this question, I'm going to go back to the point I've already hit of letting the story flow out of the characters. Make sure your characters are really round, really deep, really interesting -- and then they will by themselves start telling a more interesting story. Don't allow your characters to be slaves to a plot, tried to make it the other way around.

# Season 2 Episode 8 The Three Act Structure

What is the Three Act structure, and is it only useful in movies?

* Howard: No, it's not only useful in movies. The Three Act structure, as I outline it, is -- Act I, the hero sets out to solve a problem -- discovers a problem and sets out to solve it. Act II -- he discovers that the problem is not what he thought it was and is far bigger than he is. Act III, he triumphs anyway.
* Bob Defendi: All right. Dan, what's your answer to those questions? Do you concur?
* Dan: I concur.
* Howard: Oh dear. The look on Bob's face.
* Dan: Why shouldn't I concur?
* Howard: The look on Bob's face says we're wrong, Dan. He's doing what Brandon did.
* Bob: Let's talk about them one at a time then. I'll accept Howard's basic template. How about that?
* Howard: Thank you. That's very generous of you, Bob.

What do you need to accomplish in Act I?

* Dan: What do you need to accomplish in Act I? You need to establish who the characters are, and what they are trying to do -- what conflict they are initially trying to overcome.
* Bob: About how big a part of the story is Act I typically?
* Howard: I was going to guess that it was about a third -- maybe a little less than a third.
* Bob: I think in a screenplay they say a quarter. Books can be a little smaller. In fact, often times Act I is a little boring.
* Howard: If Act I is boring, I think you've done it wrong.
* Bob: Well , a lot of people try to cram -- one of the jobs of Act I is to establish your setting, and so it can -- it can -- it can drone on a bit.
* Bob: All right. So Act I has to have your dramatic setup, your characters, your setting, your inciting action of course. When does Act I end?
* Dan: Act I ends when they try to solve the problem that they -- they think is the problem and totally fail and realize the problem is far, far bigger.
* Howard: I would actually say that Act I ends with a triumph and the realization that we've won the battle but we're actually fighting a war.
* Bob: Okay. Other people would say that Act I ends with the main character entering a new world. Luke finding out his parents are dead and he is gonna go off to become a Jedi. Eragon the boy gets his dragon. Or the girl finding out that the golden dragon egg has bonded to her.
* Dan: So Act I is when you leave the Shire?
* Bob: Yes. You hit on one of the things that I was going to bring up there, Dan, which is that often right at the cusp either at the end of Act I or the beginning of Act II there's a big complication where everything -- just seems to fall apart –

So let's talk about Act II

* Bob: Do you? Okay, good. A lot of people call it the blue-collar work of storytelling because it's the hardest, it's the most boring to write. You've gotten past all the real neat startup stuff and you haven't gotten to all the real neat ending stuff and you just have all that stuff in the middle.
* Howard: I like the middle and that's because... well, if you have that problem, then you are suffering from... you're suffering from two problems. One is you probably have some world builder's disease where it's just very, very interesting to you to build the world and your Act I, even though you had fun writing it, I'm not going to have fun reading it.
* Howard: The third act -- with all the action sequences in it. Well, you like writing the car chase, the helicopter chase, the spaceship chase, the light saber duel -- whatever, that's fun to write. For me, it is fun taking the characters and exploring their dialogue and having them fight amongst themselves and experience pain and... you gotta drag the characters through some real grief before you get to Act III. And I enjoy setting that up and letting the characters wallow through it and... there's action and there's adventure and there's got to be intrigue in the Three Act format. There's got to be a plot twist. I don't know if that's the same as intrigue exactly.
* Dan: We talked last week about try-fail cycles and for me that's what the second act is there for. Act I establishes things, in Act III they win. Act II is where they try and fail multiple times so you get to put all kinds of exciting stuff in there, you just have to make sure they lose.

What kind of things need to happen in to keep it interesting besides what we've talked about before -- like structure wise, what needs to happen in Act II?

* Bob: I think we talked a little about... Dan's over there making [garbled] we talked a little bit earlier about having a complication right around the beginning -- either the end of the last act or the beginning of this one. Of course, most people expect a twist in the middle of the story. Star Wars is a great example. You think that they're running off and having a great old time and then you think well maybe it is a story about escaping the Death Star, and you find out it's really a story about rescuing the Princess. That's, I would say, probably the Act II twist in Star Wars. The Act II twist in Jaws is probably when Quint smashes the radio and says, "no, you're not going back home. This is where you're living for the rest of this story."
* Dan: I remember... I believe it was a Palladium book gamemaster's guide that I read... so it was talking about how to design role-playing adventures and it said that a great way to GM a game was that whenever things get slow, have a bad guy kick down the door. And I think that applies to writing as well -- anytime it starts to get slow, you don't know what happens next, have somebody kick down the door.
* Howard: Well, and those are situations where you're not forcing the plot on the characters by making the characters behave out of character, you're forcing the plot on the characters by introducing an external influence that hopefully you've foreshadowed in some way. And that's a perfectly acceptable way to keep it on track.
* Dan: Or that you would go back and foreshadow later during your rewrite.
* Bob: I think what we're talking about here are mini-climaxes. I remember my teacher in second grade had the dramatic chart up on the wall that we had to follow. And there were all the little tiny climaxes -- looked like the Dow Jones in a bull market slowly going up and down, up and down, and up and down until you got to the climax.
* Dan: I was just going to say a lot of those mini-climaxes again can be the characters thinking they're going to solve the problem. I think that often can be a great way to do a plot twist, to provide tension -- make your characters think they're a lot smarter than they are, they're about to win, and then they don't -- again and again.
* Bob: I was going to say that what you reminded me of, Howard, is that often in Act II -- you'll see it sometimes in Act III, but often in Act II -- is where the hero hits rock bottom.

What has to happen in Act III?

* Howard: Gotta wrap it up.
* Bob: Eventually. What has to happen before that?
* Dan: Something has to happen at the end of Act II, beginning of Act III, that teaches the hero what he or she needs to do to win. Some aspect of their failure or progress has taught them the lesson they need to learn in order to win at the end. That's the turning point.
* Bob: How do you keep things interesting during the climax part? Quick as you can. How do you build your tension?
* Howard: If you're running multiple plot lines -- if you're running a Hero's Journey, a romance, and a three-disaster sort of format, then you need to be switching between viewpoints so that these things are cascading at once.
* Howard: Oh, yes. Each switch happens not at a triumph, but at greater and greater peril
* Bob: Right, okay, great. And then we have denouement and we're out -- which takes us to the denouement of the broadcast, I think?
* Bob: Oh, denouement is the falling action -- after you have your climax, you have your denouement. Denouement is when the characters get to wander through the devastation or the glory or whatever they have wrought and have an emotional impact -- because you don't have an emotionally factor in the climax.

# Season 2 Episode 9 Romance

* Brandon” Do you try to be truthful to the way life really is like or do you try to give people what they feel like they want to see with romance or do you walk a line between...
* Howard: I got an e-mail from a guy a while back who said, "I'm sorry. I have to stop reading your comic because I cannot for one more minute believe in a world where a woman who has had her sights set on one man would suddenly change your mind and pursue another man instead." I just said, "Oh, sorry to have lost you." I try and write like I remember dating being -- which is miserable.
* Brandon: Okay. So you try and write the brutal truth...
* Dan: Which is you being left [inaudible] go after other guys.
* Brandon: Wait a minute. In your comic, didn't she leave the tall, strong leader of the crew for the kind of short, little bit overweight bald guy?
* Dan: The computer savvy mad scientist? With glasses?
* Howard: She did, and I get accused of Mary Sue-ing that a lot. I assure you that's not the case.
* Dan: Romance. Well, you know, writing horror... I try to always keep my characters in the teeth as much as possible and so... I think a lot of romance is wish fulfillment and should be a little unrealistic because I think actual romance in most cases is a little unrealistic so it can often be, you know, "oh I can't believe this is working," and then of course it doesn't work out in the end because this is a horror book.
* Brandon] Dave, how do you approach romance in your books?
* Dave Farland/Wolverton: The first thing that I worry about is characterization. I always look at my characters and my goal...
* Dan: Oh sure, give a real answer.
* Dave: is to make the audience feel in love with that character. In other words, it doesn't work unless you fall in love with the person. So you know... a couple of weeks ago, my wife and I were watching a movie and I went upstairs and started going to bed and she said, you know, aren't you going to stay and watch this? I said, you know, I don't really like that lady, and I don't care if she dies alone. I can't remember. It was just some romance movie that just was not working because the lady was just such a loudmouth and so into herself that it just didn't work. So I look at that. But as far as... I agree with Dan, romance shouldn't necessarily be realistic, at least when you're dealing with, you know, the feelings within the characters. I mean, you know, a lot of what this is about... there are those guys, the rare guys, that, you know, put your name up on the screen at the football game and, you know, ask to marry you or come up with some... and nowadays it's becoming far more common for kids to say man if I get into this date, what are we going to do, so, yeah, I work at trying to fulfill any woman's fantasy of what the romance should be like.
* Brandon: When I was writing my very first few books -- ones that never got published and never should be published -- I had a lot of trouble writing the female protagonists. I think I may have talked about this in a podcast before. The reason being is -- I later realized -- I was putting characters into the book simply to fill the role of romantic interest. I think this would've been a recipe for failure if I'd been doing it either with guys or with girls. But with me being a guy, I was putting the women in to be fallen in love with. And it was terrible. It was dreadful. The characters were really, really flat characters. And I think that for me, what Dave said is really important for me. Make them characters first. If the reader likes both of them a whole lot, there will be a natural desire for them to get together. In fact, you've already got something working for you, by giving a viewpoint to one character and a viewpoint to another character. Simply because of the viewpoint characters, readers are going to want them to get together. And if you don't screw it up, it'll probably be okay. It's not going to be the best romance, but it's going to be okay if they like both of them.

What makes the romance compelling?

* Howard: It comes back to... it always comes back down to identifying with the characters and either agreeing with the point of view they've adopted or disagreeing but understanding why you disagree with it. It feels like it makes sense, it doesn't feel forced, it doesn't feel like the plot is driving it. It doesn't feel like these people have to fall in love because, well, he's the male whose viewpoint we're getting and she's the female whose viewpoint we're getting...
* Dave: You have to have something that drives the two apart at some point. Whether it's family matters or religious differences or feeling like we're not have the same social class or something. There has to be something tearing them apart, but there also has to be, generally speaking, some other attraction. A woman who has two or three options, especially if she's trying to settle between two guys, there's that...
* Dan: It's a lot like trying to plot a mystery. If there's only one obvious suspect, no one is going to care about how your mystery ends, and a love story is the same way.
* Dave: Very often, there's a question of identity too. If you've got a young man, for example, and a woman who's falling in love with him and the father is saying, "don't marry him, he's from a bad family. All those McCoys are jerks, we've been shooting them for 100 years." And she says, "yes, father, but it's time for us Hatfields to end this war." There's that question of who this character really is on the inside that has to be discovered through the ongoing plot. And I think that as authors very often we just want to make them characters for each other to fall in love with and we don't really take the time to have the fun with the character and start discovering who this guy really is and what's his internal landscape, what's he like when you get to really get to know him deep down -- and that's when you should fall in love with him.
* Dan: I would further add to that watching those characters become better than they were at the beginning is what's going to make you fall in love with them.
* Brandon: This gets back to what we've mentioned a lot which is tying the conflicts together. Not just the romance, it's the internal development of the character tied to the romance hopefully tied somehow to the plot or the setting as well so that we get all three working together. Complain that you will about this person, but Terry Goodkind actually did a really good job of this in Wizards First Rule where he tied the romance between the main characters to the magic system and it was the magic that was keeping them apart. And when they figured out how to make the magic work in the right way, it kind of came together in a climax which removed the barriers between them. It was a fantastic climax to a book. Everything came together really well for that because of how tied together they were.

Do you approach writing females and males differently in romantic situations and how do you approach this difference -- without getting us killed by our female listeners?

* Dan: Boy. What I have learned is first of all I am just not very good at writing from a female perspective. And second of all -- it goes back to what you said at the beginning, that if the girl is only in there so she can fall in love with the hero, it's gonna be obvious. And the way to write the girl so that she works is to just really let her be the star of her own story. Make her a full-fledged character who may or may not end up with the guy and has all of her own concerns and her own things going on and then if that works, hurray.
* Brandon: Would you say that women worry more about relationships than guys do, or not?
* Dan: I think guys do as well, just in very different ways.
* Brandon: Okay, how do they do it differently?
* Dave: I think there is. If I'm dealing with a female character, and I'm working at building a romance, I tend to have her maybe fantasize about the relationship -- think about it a little bit more than the men do. I think that I probably do that because as a male you are often taught to just sort of wing it... you are, you're on a date and you're winging it half the time. And very often when I was out on dates, I would find that the women had been plotting for days or weeks as to what we were going to do and you better darn well fulfill my fantasies or live up to them or whatever.
* Dan: One thing I do do -- I mentioned before we started this podcast that I was just working on a romantic chapter of my book today -- one of the tricks that I use -- maybe this is reading too much of my own life into it -- is that I really make the guys a little more oblivious about the whole thing -- that they will kind of pine after a girl without really taking any steps in that direction. They think they're not good enough, or they think that she probably already has a boyfriend anyway because she's so pretty and things like that that I think are more in line with how guys in my experience tend to think about women.
* Dave: Not just pretty. If they're talented and smart, they're also intimidating. You put the whole package together, women are downright terrifying.
* Brandon: If there's anything to say, that would be it. But I was going to say, the whole process is terrifying, generally, to all parties involved and that's something to remember. There are very few people who actually think they are good at this. There are a lot of people who act like they think they are good at this, but very few who actually believe it. And write it that way. It comes out better. People stumble through these things. It never works out the way you expect it to. And that's good for writing because it keeps the conflict moving.

# Season 2 Episode 10 The Boring Parts

* Brandon: We're going to talk today -- this is a question I receive a lot from readers and listeners who want to know how we write the boring parts. When they say that, what they're meaning is they plot out their story -- they've got these big exciting climaxes several places through the book, and then they say, "Wait a minute, how do I get between these parts?" How do you write the in-between parts?
* Dan: What do I do? I try to find the most interesting thing that can happen. I'm currently in the middle of writing book three and today was the fourth chapter in a row that I've had to cut in half because they were way too long...
* Brandon: Okay. That means lots of interesting stuff is happening.
* Dan: That means lots of interesting stuff is happening and they were all supposed to be the boring parts. It was supposed to be the main character trying to figure out the crime, trying to track down the bad guy, and just letting him really run free with, you know, he needs to think this -- well, what would prompt that thought? What would give him this clue? -- sparked so many other ideas... if I just let it be the boring part of one scene of a guy saying, "Well, his head was cut off... and the guy probably had a knife..."
* Howard: When you say the boring parts, I look at boring in two ways. If I'm reading a book and I hit a boring part, someone spent time writing something they shouldn't have. It just shouldn't be there. If you wrote something and it is boring to write and to read, just stop writing it. That's the easiest way to take care of it. Now if it's boring work for you because you haven't yet gotten to that really exciting part of the story that you want to tell, sometimes the easiest thing to do is to skip ahead to the exciting part of the story -- write that bit, and then look at it very closely and figure out, okay, what are the elements here that I absolutely have to put in place before I can tell that bit, and how am I going to try to write those, and you backpedal and write the chapter that goes in between them, and write it is interestingly as possible.
* Brandon: Okay, but that's what we're getting to, is the "interestingly as possible" I think escapes a lot of newer writers. Those are words we can say. What they're asking is, what is that, "interestingly as possible." If I just skip through and write the exciting parts, I've got a 10,000 word story. I want to write a novel. How do you do that in-between parts?
* Dave Farland/Wolverton: The first thing that I do is, I look at my characters -- there's a bunch of different answers -- first thing I do is, okay, how can I write this interesting? Second thing is, I look at my characters and I say, "Okay, which one of these characters is in the most pain? Which is suffering the most at this point?" Which is what Orson Scott Card recommends. He says, "Hey, your viewpoint characters should be the one who is in the most pain, the one who's suffering the most." So I look at that character and I say why is that person suffering and as soon as I start discussing that, I'm writing about something that is interesting. Very often, if you've got a climactic scene for example if you know you're going to be 40 pages or 100 pages till the next climactic scene, you've kind of got to wind down on what just happened so your characters need to be haunted by what happened. They've also got to be formulating plans about how to react to what they're going to do. They've got to choose how they are going to react. Are we going to storm the castle? Are we going to flee for our lives? Are we going to stand here like frightened rabbits with our hearts hammering while the enemy comes upon us? You have to make all these different choices. So it's getting into the character's heads, into their emotions, into their hearts. That's what I end up doing.
* Brandon: You have to have a character who can carry an entire book. This is honestly why I love third person limited is because when the scene gets boring one of the first things I do, one of my fallbacks is different viewpoint character. This doesn't necessarily... I don't necessarily do the look for the most pains... I look and say, "Who's going to be really interesting for a couple of scenes?"
* Howard: Who's got the best part of the story right now?
* Brandon: That's right that would just keep me going through the scenes. If I need to shake it up, that's the number one thing I do. And you'll see that in my book sometimes. Sometimes I'll be telling a scene... I'm like, I need to shake this up, all right, it's from Dan's viewpoint, he's going to get killed... That's really what happened. I'm writing a scene, all right, I've written scenes like this a whole lot before the series, it's the middle book, I'm going to tell it from the viewpoint of the guard standing on the wall rather than the Mistborn who's flying through the air towards them. An interesting scene. It feels very dramatic...
* Dave: I think that's a really good way to do it. A lot of times when you're writing you don't realize just how habitual it has become. I always approach the scene this way, I always start it this way. So each time you approach a scene, just say, "How am I going to do it that's going to be a new way?" You know the way you can tell the story is boring, by the way, is if you use the word "finally." Finally, John made it to the bathroom. If you do that, that's just a sign... first of all, I always cut out the word "finally" if I ever do come up with one. But then I say to myself, I've got to back out and figure out how to shorten the three paragraphs in front of it because I just wrote the word "finally."
* Dan: I'm going to take a slightly different tack on this and say if you're having trouble with the boring parts, that might not be a part that should be in there. Part of how to write the boring parts is knowing what to cut out.
* Dave: You know what though, that's dangerous. And there are other ways to make a story interesting. It doesn't have to always be the conflict. For example, you can just write beautifully about something, and that's rewarding to the audience. So if you do a beautifully written description of life outside the manor -- the grounds outside the manor or something, that in itself can be fascinating. Or not necessarily just prose, but maybe a new conflict. We can go from the big battle scene to we're going to go now to the romantic scene, what's the romantic fallout of what just happened?
* Brandon” What Dan said had to be said. Howard actually said it a little bit earlier, too, which is that if it's really boring, you may just want to cut. But the focus of this particular podcast is not cutting out, it's making…
* Howard: Slogging through it, you gotta write it.
* Brandon: Yes, thank you. Cause sometimes you have to. Howard said something earlier which is just stop writing it. That can be dangerous for new writers. Where sometimes people say, every time I get to chapter 5, it gets boring, I stop and start a new book. That happens to a lot of authors. What you need to learn to do is make chapter 5 as exciting as chapter 1 or more exciting.
* Dan: Now, Dave mentioned conflict, and we always come back to that. I think it's the most important thing. And if the section you're writing doesn't have any conflict in it at all, then of course it's boring. It doesn't have to be the main conflict -- they don't have to be killing Sauron in every single chapter of your book.
* Brandon: Actually, one of the things I wrote down for this to give as a suggestion was first identified which are major plots are -- we talked about that in a previous podcast -- and then throw a wrinkle into a main plot. Having... just throwing in a fight... I have a friend who says, "Oh, I can always just throw in a fight. It's getting boring, throw in a fight." Well, yes and no. It's better to identify what is the main plot for my characters, what are they trying to accomplish, what can be a wrinkle in stopping them from accomplishing it? If you're trying to get from point A to point B, and it's very tense, a horse throwing a shoe can be as powerful of a conflict as getting jumped by ninjas.
* Howard: When you get to Chapter 5 or whichever chapter you're bored about, pick a different emotion -- instead of picking action and excitement, pick suspense or romance or something...
* Dave: There's one more thing that you can do, too, though. A lot of times people who are getting bored with their story don't realize that what's going on is that they haven't properly either deepened or broadened their conflict. And so maybe they need to stop and say, "Okay, my conflict just seems to be sort of the same conflict that just got pounded in the last one -- maybe instead of fighting orcs this time, we need to escape from [unclear] or something."
* Howard: Let me turn that statement around real quick, Dave. When you write, are there parts that bore you while you're writing?
* Dave: Very rarely. Very rarely.
* Howard: Okay. So from what you've just said, it sounds like, if you're being bored, it probably means you're not doing something right.
* Brandon: That's a bad thing, if you're being bored.
* Brandon: Let me define... for me, there are a lot of times when I sit down and look at a scene that I've got to write and say, "Oh, man, I'm not into writing this right now." Once I start writing, if I'm still bored, that's a problem. That does happen to me, but I do one of these fallbacks. I've got to approach the scene from a different viewpoint, I've got to approach the scene and I've got to set it in a new place. That's another big one I do. New setting. Okay, my thieves have always met in the same place, it's getting dry for me, let's have them have their meeting in a restaurant instead or something like this. Different scene. The other one is unexpected wrinkle. Like I said before. I actually had a guy today at one of my signings come to me and say the exact thing like you just said. "I love writing these action scenes but all the stuff in between is really boring, how do I write the stuff in between?" Learn to play other notes. You're trying to play a symphony with only A flat. Now there are books that are gonna be heavily tilted toward that one note -- lots of action. You're reading a drizard (sp?) book, you want lots of action, but a good book, a drizard book, he's playing multiple notes. They may be more muted than the battle conflict, but I mean, drizard, you've got this great character conflict of this man who doesn't fit into his culture and doesn't fit into another culture which is a huge conflict of the entire series as well. Those aren't just action books. Bob knows how to play multiple notes. You've got to learn to play multiple notes too to write a book.
* Howard: You don't want your action scenes to be like a Jackie Chan movie where they've stitched together some fantastic choreography with a plot that nobody cares about and we're going to blow through this as fast as we can so that we can get to the ladder fights...
* Brandon: And I've said before, that works really well in the film, you can do that in a film. It doesn't work as well in a book.
* Dan: The trap I see myself falling into all the time is that my character will tend to think of the same things every time. We've actually talked about that before as if your character is a warrior, he will see things in a warrior's light. But if that becomes too much, then it becomes boring. If a sociopath is constantly wanting to kill everyone he meets, then everyone is going to become bored with that.
* Brandon: We're running out of time on this. There's one more thing I had on my list which was really interesting side characters. I think this would work really well for writing first-person. Throw in an interesting side character, perhaps tied to the plot. The interesting side character is the wrinkle in the plot you're getting.
* Howard: But don't wait too long before introducing them.
* Brandon: You can have them in for just a chapter and then they're gone. Just an interesting side character for one chapter can work well. Be careful not to girl-in-a-phonebooth them -- don't make them so interesting that they are more interesting than your main character, but having them show up for just one chapter can work really well.

# Season 2 Episode 11 Ah… [aka Questions for Dave]

Publishing advice for new authors. Writers wanting to break in -- what is your top publishing advice in just the short period of time, in a couple of minutes.

* Dave Farland/Wolverton: Okay. Top publishing advice: first, write what you love. When I first wrote my... what I wrote my first book, I wrote a book called On My Way to Paradise, which was a cyberpunk Latin American kind of novel. And my publisher then said, "What do you want to write next?" And I said, "I want to write a big fantasy." And she said, "Well, you're a science fiction author, you can't write fantasy. You're a best-selling science fiction author, most people take 20 years to get where you got with your first book." So they didn't let me write fantasy. I started writing fantasy after 10 years as a birthday present to myself. Last year, I asked my agent if I could do a science fiction novel. He went to my editors, they said, "You're a fantasy author. We will not accept any science fiction from you whatsoever." So I guess my first thing is pick your rut.
* Howard: Is this why you have two names?
* Dave: It is. That's part of why I have two names. I'm two different people. A number of authors do it. There's reasons beyond that though. Because if you keep your name and your trying to write into different genres, let's say that you're selling 50,000 books in science fiction and you're selling 100,000 books in fantasy, and you start switching off -- what happens is the next time that you write a fantasy novel, the bookstores are going to order the same number of science fiction books that you sold before and you just cut your sales in half in your fantasy, so you don't want to do that.

How do you name your characters?

* Dave: How do I name my characters? I look for names that resonate within the genre that they are in. By that I mean let's say that you're writing a fantasy story and it's a medieval fantasy. Now you know that in a medieval English fantasy set in something like the Middle Ages that you are not going to have a character named Juan and Gregorio wandering around the countryside... So you choose something that sounds like a character... you can use Tom instead of Juan, you can probably use John. But if you start looking at fantasy names, they're all made to sound alike or to sound similar. How many girls do you see who are named things like Kira or Kara -- it's just almost probably 70, 75% of the names that come up in fantasy start with a K and end with an A. So you look for something that resonates within the genre. That's all I look for.

State of the publishing industry right now in sci-fi fantasy. Any words of wisdom for authors on it? A lot of people are saying publishers aren't buying anything. Should authors just give up?

* Dave: First of all, right now, the state of science fiction and fantasy is this. Fantasy got overbought for a while and a lot of publishers are pulling back on that, making it a little bit harder. Conversely, they are more interested right now in publishing science fiction [background woohoo] so I've been seeing some renewed interest even in old titles and things like that. There are always publishers who will pull back there's a lot of talk about a publisher that announced that they were temporarily not buying. Most of the time publishers do not announce that they are not buying. They just stop buying. They just talk among each other and say we're not going to buy. It was basically a dumb decision on the part of one of their corporate executives who probably was the one who got fired today. In any case, what it all comes down to...

Do you have any idea what the next literary fad is going to be?

* Dave: Should I tell you? Well, look at the numbers. If you look at it right now, young adult fiction has just been going gonzo. Anytime anybody writes a young adult book, it seems like it's going up before an auction. That's a great sign to me because it means that there are a lot of young people who are being exposed to fantasy, to science fiction, and whatnot. And I think that what we are going to see is... how shall I say it? I think we're going to see a rebirth of fantasy in the next five years. I think you'll see it just explode. And I'm talking about adult fantasies like Lord of the Rings, that kind of thing. I think that's going to be a big genre.
* Howard: So the people over the last 10 years... the kids who've been reading the Harry Potters and...
* Dave: The kids who've been reading the Harry Potters and things like that, they are...
* Howard: They're going to grow up and they're going to want to be reading...
* Dave: They're primed and they're going to say, "You know, this world is really a nasty place. I'd like to get back and read a really fun fantasy." Whenever you have a recession like what we're going through right now, they often say that writing is a recession proof kind of industry, and even if you look at some of the stores... we're seeing companies that are saying okay, our sales are down 7% but not our fiction sales. Our fiction sales are up 1%. That kind of thing. That's a really strong indicator that we are pretty recession proof. People aren't going on vacation, they're not going to Mexico, they're going to stay home and I'm going to get at least a book while I sit here so I've got something to read.

How did you break in? What's your story?

* Dave: Well, my story is that I started with writing contests. I was in college, I wrote my first little short story, I got an A on it. And our teacher announced at the end of the class that there was going to be a writing contest in the school. And I went and erased my name off of the paper and dropped it into the box -- made it so that it fit their format. And I won 50 bucks. Which wasn't very much money, but then I thought, I spent seven hours writing that story -- I made seven dollars per hour. What if I wrote a better story and I won 1st place? What if I had worked three hours harder and had won that 400 bucks? So the next year my goal was to try to win 1st place in a story contest. And I wrote several short stories and sent them out and won 1st place in several contests. In fact, the four stories that I entered I won 1st place in all of them including the grand prize for the international L. Ron Hubbard Writers of the Future contest which was a big contest. And at the contest, Robert Silverberg was one of the judges and he really liked my story. And he called up Terry Carr and he said, "We should offer this guy a hard soft publishing deal when we get to the awards ceremony." So I had heard about this something in the offing. He worked with a company called Donald I Find. Well Robert Silverberg quit Donald I Find about four weeks before I went to the awards ceremony. And then Terry Carr died of a heart attack about a week before. So I was pretty depressed. But I got to the awards ceremony -- we had it on top of the World Trade Center. We had Isaac Asimov there, we had Mark Hamill who was Luke Skywalker in Star Wars, we had lots of other luminaries, and it was really great. But while we were there, I was approached by just about every editor in the field at the time. I had eight different editors hand me their cards and say they wanted to see my first novel proposal. Which I just happened to have in my suitcase, but I didn't have eight copies, I only had three copies because I was just not that optimistic.
* Howard: Did you give out all three?
* Dave: I didn't. I decided not to play favorites. Instead, I called an agent the next morning. I called Virginia Kidd and she said, "Well, I haven't taken a client in 10 years, but James Tiptree Junior just committed suicide yesterday and I've got an opening." But she got me a three novel contract with Bantam books about three days later. So that's how I got started. It is fraught with difficulty, but I learned a lot by trying to write for contests. Because I started looking at my... I said who is going to be judging this contest and then I would go read their writings and I would find out what that editor or what that writer liked in their own writing and then I would say, "Okay, I'm going to have to use more metaphors in this story, for example. This person really likes top-notch metaphors." Or maybe I'm going to have to have more action. And I started learning to write to an audience. And then you get to things like Writers of the Future where you've got 12 potential jurors and it's a mess. You've got to start saying how do I write for a really broad audience. It was a good learning ground, and I made lots of money doing it.

How do you begin a book? Do you start with characters, do you start with plot, or do you start with setting?

* Dave: I almost always start with setting, and the reason I start with the setting is that my character is going to grow out of his setting. I mean, if you are living in a medieval fiefdom, you're going to have a certain education level, you're going to have a certain economic standing and social standing and whatnot. And then my plot has to grow out of my characters, so I have to almost take that order every single time.

# Season 2 Episode 12 Theme

What is the definition of theme?

* Dan: Theme, at its most basic, is what something is about. The way that a plot is kind of the skeleton that you hang over something, theme is like the... The soul that you stick inside it.
* Brandon: What the story means?
* Dan: Yes.
* Brandon: A great example of this... you could say that the theme of the Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe is repentance, redemption and Christian symbolism...

So the question is, should you as a writer be thinking about theme?

* Howard: I don't think about theme. I try to write interesting stories that will be funny. Yes, I'm writing satire, and sometimes it's political satire and sometimes it's religious satire. And I suppose there are themes to be found there. But I enjoy letting the reader decipher that theme without me telling them where they are supposed to go.
* Brandon: Okay. Dan, theme. I think theme is stronger in your books than it is in either my stories or Howard's. Do you think about that theme ahead of time?
* Dan: To some degree, yes, I do. Part of that is the genre, because as we talked about in our horror podcast, horror tends to be a moral genre anyway. But for me... I always think about my books on at least three levels. This book is about a kid who is a serial killer who's fighting demons. It's also about this, and down at its core, it's about something else. But I'm very careful not to let those deeper ones get too big for their britches. I don't want them to be so blatant that people will go, "Oh come on, stop writing this fable and just tell me a story." If it's in there, and you can find it, wonderful. I'm delighted. I look forward to talking with readers about the themes they have found in my stories. But I don't want them to overpower the story.
* Brandon: I would say, answering my own question, for me, I do think about theme, but I think about it as I'm writing the book, not as I prepare the book, generally. Theme for me comes out as theme focused on a character. What a character is caring about will become an overarching motivation for them, then just as you write, connections will happen, and you will place that character in situations where their theme can manifest. And I do do it a little bit consciously. In book 2 of Mistborn, we've got a character who's struggling to become a king, and therefore the theme of what does it mean to be a leader and what are the costs of being a leader and what are the costs of idealism became very important to me as a writer when I was writing that because they were so important to the character. But I didn't actually sit down and say I want to write a book about the importance of this.
* Howard: Now let me ask you a follow-up question there. So we're talking about... are we allowed to say that we are talking about Eland?
* Brandon: Yes.
* Howard: Good. The statute of limitations has passed. So, Eland is trying to be a good king. In sitting down to write that, you've decided that that's one of your book's themes.
* Brandon: I decided that's a character conflict.
* Howard: No, but... it's a character conflict, and so it's thematic to that character, it's contained in your book -- it's one of your book's themes. Do you then... does that change your behavior such that you sit down and start researching material on that theme, to find out, "Well, gosh, what does make a good king?" And go to Hammurabi and Isaiah and...
* Brandon: I do sometimes. I'm an armchair philosopher, taken a lot of philosophy classes when I was an undergraduate. It's fascinating to me. I think the best themes -- this is personal -- I think the best themes are ones that are explored from all sides. No strawman and beyond that no answers. I'm really not trying to give answers. Sometimes I do because the characters will make decisions. That doesn't necessarily mean that I'm agreeing with that decision, but it will look like that to anyone who reads. It's impossible to not assume that that's...
* Howard: Yeah, the character arrives at an answer, so at a superficial level, someone could read the book and say, "Oh well, this is the answer" when in fact the answer was not perfect.
* Dan: You say you kind of develop that theme out of Eland's character. You read the third book, that theme is everywhere. There's Yomen, there's Spook, there's Sazid, there's... everyone is dealing with that. At what point did that become a book theme instead of a character theme?
* Brandon: Um. Boy. I would say... when I decided to put other characters... it was... I dealt with it in book 2, and it was that desire I had to approach it from all sides rather than just showing one side. And so in this case, I had Yomen as a character who is kind of opposed to Eland approaching the theme from a different direction and then we had Spook approaching it from a slightly different direction and going through different experiences. I think that it was just my desire when I wrote... often when I write a book that will come up with these great ideas and say, "Wow, this is awesome. I need to explore this more." And then you'll see me reacting to my own books with other books. Warbreaker is a reaction to Elantris in a lot of ways. What is it like to become... to be a person who is given the power of a God? I didn't really get into it in Elantris because the people don't have the power of the gods, they have lost the power of the gods. So, hence, suddenly I write Warbreaker dealing with the same theme but from a different tack. That happens to me a lot.
* Brandon: Let's ask you guys a question then. One of my favorite quotes on theme ever is by Oscar Wilde. I'm not quoting this directly, but it's from the foreword to The Picture of Dorian Gray where he says art must be useless to be art, if it's trying to do anything else, it stops being art and it starts doing what it's trying to do. So in order to create something that is pure art, it... pure art is enjoyed only for its aesthetic artistic value. But if you've read The Picture of Dorian Gray, it's a very didactic story. It's obviously dealing with this powerful theme of hedonism and what it does to a person or Dorian Gray ends up being destroyed by his hedonistic lifestyle in the same way that Oscar Wilde was being destroyed by his own hedonistic lifestyle. It was probably the most poignant book of his career.

Should fiction mean something?

* Howard: is going to sit down and is going to put their own... draw their own meaning. Now with The Picture of Dorian Gray, whatever he said at the beginning of that book, I have to think the man was not a complete idiot, and knew he was contradicting...
* Brandon: Oscar Wilde is famous for contradicting himself. That's one of the things he loved to do.
* Howard: And I'm sure he did it in order to force you to quest a little bit deeper into the book for meaning.
* Brandon: But there is something to be said for creating art for pure aesthetic value. Looking at a picture and not saying what was the artist trying to convey... just look at it and say, "Wow, that's beautiful." And I think that might be what he was trying to say, that art should at some point just say, "Wow, that's beautiful" and that's the point.
* Howard: So it has to work independent of theme. I'm fine with that. I love the fact that a good story works without me sitting down and saying, "Oh, wait a minute, this is -- author's message, author's message." But I also love being able to sit down with a book a second time and try to learn something, not necessarily about the author, but about human nature. You know the works of... when I read Orson Scott Card, the way he writes children, the way he writes most of his characters, you read those characters and you learn things about people. I like that. And I think you can learn that from all kinds of books.
* Dan: You called out my English degree earlier, so we're going to dust it off and bring up the concept of the readerly and writerly. Which are weird English words that you only care about while you're in a class. Basically if a text or a story is readerly, that means that the reader is required to put some of themself into it. That's exactly what Howard was talking about earlier, with... can something be completely meaningless. No, because no matter what it says there, you're bringing all of your own experiences to it, you're bringing all of your own interests and desires and puzzles...

Can theme ruin the book for you?

* Howard: If the theme... if you, with Eland had been doing what you are doing, and then had one of the characters come out and soliloquy whatever and talk about what does it really mean to be a good leader and give us a couple paragraphs on that, that would have ruined it.
* Brandon: Goodkind takes a lot of flak for doing this. Some people really love it, some people hate it. Dan, what's your opinion?
* Dan: For example, there was one that was just devoutly antisocialist. It was this science-fiction story taking place on some spaceship and they encountered some aliens that had like a hive mind or whatever and at the end, one of the characters stood up and gave a whole diatribe against their whole civilization because it had socialist principles behind it. And that's taking it a little too far.
* Howard: A good author can deliver the theme in such a way that most readers are going to read that as just another part of the story and... guys with English degrees may say, "Ah, you're spoonfeeding me, I hate this." But a good writer can do it well I think a bad writer or a mediocre writer can take a ham-handed approach and completely destroy their work.
* Dan: You look at something like Toy Story Two that my children enjoy completely wonderfully on one level but adults can enjoy just as much on three or four other levels underneath the kids aren't even aware of. If you write it well, then any audience can look at it and get something out of it.
* Brandon: Okay. I'm actually changing my opinion just a little bit as I think about this and when we talk about this podcast. I used to say, "Don't even think about it. Don't try to put theme in your story."
* Howard: What did we just accomplish, Dan?
* Dan: This is the first time we've ever been the right ones.
* Howard: Knuckles across the table. Go ahead Brandon.
* Brandon: Thank you, Howard. I often say, "Don't try to make your writing mean anything." But as I consider it, the best stories do mean something, and some of that has to be conscious. They didn't make Toy Story Two without knowing they were putting in this theme of growing up and abandoning childhood and kind of the regret that's involved in that. And so I do think it's something you need to think about. But I think the answer is what Howard said, which is... or no, it's what you said Dan -- don't let it overshadow. Don't let it overshadow the story and the characters. But it can add another level. It can make a good story great, or a great story timeless, if you can come up with a really good theme that matches the characters.
* Howard: I think it can also help you construct your story. If you're halfway through and you realize, "Wow, I've got a theme running here and I really need to let this character finish exploring it." If you don't let the character finish exploring it, you may have broken the structure of the book.

# Season 2 Episode 13 Violence

Why do you use violence in your stories?

* Howard: Violence is one of the ultimate shaping forces of human culture and to not write about it is dishonest. To write about it in such a way that it's funny is potentially dangerous. And so I'm walking this weird moral line that.
* Dan: You know, I find myself thinking about the weird moral lines as well when I use violence in my books, because one of the reasons I think people have said my books are too violent is because... or have a lot of violence in them... is because I try to portray it as realistically as I can. I don't want this to be a slasher horror, I would like it to actually deal with the consequences of hitting someone in the face. And that is not something that happens a lot. There's usually not a lot of consequences to violence in movies and.in genre fiction. It's very disturbing to some people to see those consequences.
* Brandon: The scene that sometimes bothers people in mine -- it's also in Mistborn 2, we talked about this book last week -- but there's a scene where one of the characters assaults a fortified position of the opposing army and goes to town on them. She has been kind of under the influence of someone else who is more aggressive and more violent and has convinced her that this is the only way to protect those whom she loves and so she just lets loose.
* Howard: And her taking that path shaped her. I don't think you could have written that book without that scene.
* Brandon: I'll tell you where the scene came from. This scene came from watching the Matrix and being bothered by the fact that there were no consequences. The best scene in that movie is a scene where the heroes are mowing down innocent guards -- just guys who are just there doing their jobs -- the good guys are getting mowed down by these anarchists who are the protagonists -- but just a huge killing spree and it's beautiful. The reason that scene bothered me so much was because of the beauty of it and the lack of consequences.
* Howard: It was beautiful and ultimately inconsequential. Those characters went through that and remained completely unchanged.
* Brandon: Unchanged. And they... there are lots of arguments for... they didn't even need to go that direction. It was there in the movie simply to show the good guys being bad... and doing... bad in the bad being cool sense... And killing lots of people. And that scene really bothered me. Particularly because of the effect it had on me. That I wanted to watch that scene over and over again. That's what bothered me. Well, because of the beauty of the choreography. And so I wanted to put a scene in one of my books where I said, "No, this isn't what happens." If you go through with something like this... if you were a programmer up until a few days ago, and you went and did something like this, you would not have the ramifications -- the lack of them that's portrayed in the movie. You were talking about this, Dan?
* Dan: One of the books... one of the horror books that I have read recently and loved thoroughly was Doppelganger, and I loved the... It's about a high school kid... Yeah, I can't remember the author. Anyway, it's a wonderful book about what it's like to be a monster in our society and it deals with a lot of different themes like we talked about last week, but there's a part at the end... This monster ends up in a family with an abusive father and he solves this problem by beating up the father and that just drove me crazy. Exactly like you're talking about. Because you can't solve violence with violence. It does not work. It has never worked. And it worked in this book and that bothered me. Thinking about that became my entire second book of my trilogy -- was let's deal with the consequences of trying to solve violence with violence. Let's see what it will do to you when you go down that road. That's where the whole second book came from.

So is there a limit? Where do you draw your line?

* Brandon: In our theme one, we said we have to approach things from all viewpoints. Is there something to be said for the stormtrooper concept? I remember one of the old RPGs for Star Wars said to the GM, "Don't make your characters think about the poor stormtrooper's family. Don't make them worry that they're creating... This will ruin the enjoyment of the game. This is Star Wars, they are faceless bad guys." Is there something to be said for that, or is that just a completely immoral position?
* Howard: It is a... let me back up just a little bit. I've done a bunch of research on violence. I've read On Killing by Lieut. Col. David Grossman. The Tribes article by... I can't remember his name. Both of these talk about the fact that there is a small group of people in our population -- between 2 1/2 and 5% -- who can, with no compunction, take another human life. And these people end up either as sociopaths in prison or they end up protecting us. There are the wolves and the sheepdogs and most of the rest of us are sheep. And as sheep, we're scared of anything that's got teeth whether it's a wolf or a sheepdog. We fear the police and we fear the gangsta... It's very, very telling in my writing because I try and play up the hero is some of the sheepdogs and I try and play up the villainy of the wolves, but I understand that those people come from the same mindset and it's a very real mindset.
* Dan: You know, I think there is. There's definitely some people who are going to disagree, but I think that there is a place for a Jackie Chan ladder fight where he hits 17 people in a row with a ladder... Sure, he doesn't kill anyone, but that isn't going to sue the troubled mind of a mother whose child hit someone with a ladder. It's very cool to watch that. It's fun to play first-person shooters. It's fun to watch the stormtroopers go down. Not because you want them to go down, but because they represent a triumph on the part of the hero.
* Howard: Well, when you talk about making them faceless, what you're really talking about is de-humanizing or demonizing the enemy. And that's something that we do in video games, it's something that we do in fiction, it's something that we do in real life.
* Brandon: The reason why Lucas changed from stormtroopers to robots... I think this may have bothered him... we can enjoy it much more when the lightsabers are chopping off the heads of robots that all look exactly identical and... But you're right that we do this. You look at any civilization at war...
* Howard: You have to do it. Because when you are at war, your civilization, in many cases your home and family... if you're fighting a war of defense just as much as if you're playing conquistador... you have to demonize the enemy at least long enough for your soldiers to get their job done, and then -- and this is the part that a good writer will focus on -- then you have to let those soldiers come home and work through this because some of them are grieving over the lives that they have taken in the battlefield.
* Dan: I'm not entirely sure. I've noticed something very interesting is I have had people read my books. I'm almost done with three now, but people have read one and read two. Book one, in my opinion, is far bloodier, it's far gorier, there is more violence in it. Book 2 creeps people out way more, they find it more disturbing, and they think of it as a more violent book even though it's not. And it's because it's a different kind of violence, it's portrayed in a different way.
* Brandon: How did you do that? The readers want to know how you did that.
* Dan: Book 2 focuses much more on planned, meticulous violence...
* Brandon: Premeditation?
* Dan: It focuses on torture rather than spur of the moment, I have to kill this person because I will die otherwise. Specifically in my book two it's the doctor saying, "I don't have to give you this shot, but it makes me laugh when I do," and then he gives it to you.
* Brandon: Yeah. This is something we haven't brought up yet, but I think is very important. There is... violence... if there is no violence in the book, it is hard to maintain tension. And suspense -- suspense is the wrong word -- but we use violence to raise the stakes in a lot of our stories.
* Howard: We use violence to raise the stakes because those are the kind of stakes we are dealing with. In a romance, you use breaking up, or adultery, or pregnancy to raise the stakes.
* Brandon: But everyone fears being hurt -- well, almost everybody -- fears being hurt and fears dying. These are things that are universal and they work very well as emotional motivation for characters. I haven't answered my own question, so perhaps I should. Have I hit the line? I think I probably have, honestly, with the Mistborn books. I'm talking... the entire book two. We also have Eland beheading somebody in cold blood... The book two did deal with violence as a theme. And I think that's... overall, the whole book was a line for me. I backed off from it a little in book 3, then I wrote Warbreaker and backed off a whole lot. Will I approach these things again? Maybe I will. I probably will. Will I go further? I don't know. It depends on what's important for the book.
* Howard: That's an interesting thought. Because I... the line that I try to draw away from is am I glorifying violence to the point that people are going to want to emulate this in the wrong sorts of ways? I love to see people join police forces, join the military, and want to serve and do good things. I don't want to be responsible for breeding a generation of killers.
* Dan: Now Howard said something earlier when he talked about glorifying violence. Again I cannot place any of my quotes, but there's a rather famous movie director who said that it's impossible to make a war movie that does not glorify war because the mere act of looking at it makes it sensational to us. So I think in many ways regardless of how we use violence is always going to be that kind of eager visceral response in the reader.
* Howard: Which means you always have to come back from it and say and here is the consequence.
* Brandon: I think morality is more about consequences than it is about what you depict or choose not to depict. There are arguments to be made for the classic war movies where they aren't showing us much violence, or the directors are stepping away from that, and it actually makes the films very strong. But, Saving Pvt. Ryan is a very strong film and I don't think he could have achieved what he did without trying to depict it. We'll just bat this back at the readers. This is going to be a personal thing for you guys to decide. Whether you deal with consequences, how much violence you have in your books. I think it's something you need to think about, because one thing I think a lot of readers don't understand... writers don't understand is once you get published, that's locked in stone, and that represents you. And people will call you on it.

# Season 2 Episode 14 Writing Habits

* Howard: Breakfast. I get dressed out in my I-am-going-to-work clothes...
* Brandon: So you get dressed up in your...
* Howard: I get dressed up to go to work.
* Brandon: Which is around the corner in the office?
* Howard: Yeah, down the hall. And I sit down and write.
* Brandon: Why do you do that?
* Howard: I do that because the writing space for me is also a head space. If I'm still wearing my pajamas, I don't feel like I'm really ready to get started with the day. And then I sit down and I start writing. For me, if I need to write a week's worth of comics so that I can be drawing in the afternoon, if I haven't really started writing by 10 AM, I... the day is a wash, the day is a disaster. I really have to be writing in the morning. Now once I start writing, I can write way past 10 AM.
* Brandon: So why is that? Why?
* Howard: I'm not sure why that is.
* Brandon: It can happen to me, too. I guess we're talking about the psychology of being goofy writer people in this episode because sometimes... if I'll look at... if an hour... if I'm really going, an hour's worth of time can get a lot of work done. But if I sit down and say I only have an hour, nothing happens.
* Howard: Nothing happens.
* Brandon: Nothing at all... gets done at all. And it's completely just this mental head space thing.
* Howard: There's a book years ago... written years ago, called Peopleware which talked about knowledge workers in the information age -- which is essentially what we are. We're creative professionals, but we're knowledge workers. And one of the points that they made is that the average knowledge worker really only gets about three hours of work done a day...
* Dan: That's what I've been telling my bosses for years. They never believed me.
* Howard: But that three hours of work, if it's all in one block with no interruptions, it's an extremely productive block of time. And then most of the rest of the day is spent in activities called refilling the well, going back to the well, recharging, watercooler conversation, research, whatever. But that three hours of writing, of output, of programming or whatever is really critical and it has to have some momentum. If you've only got an hour to write, then, well, 45 minutes of that might be just warmup, and then you get moving, and you really only get 15 minutes of good writing, and say, "Eh, now I've got to get done." Whereas if you've got three hours to write, you spend that 45 minute warm-up and then there's that hour in the middle where it's just fantastic.
* Brandon] I'll say it works this way for me. I have to have a block of four hours. There's got to be people out there that do this differently. I don't know. But me, if I don't look down at my clock and at least see that I have got a four hour chunk, it's going to be hard for me to put up the motivation to get into it, because I know just as soon as I get started working on something and really getting into it, I'm going to get interrupted and stopped. If I've only got a two hour block, I'll do something else. I'll answer e-mails, maybe do some brainstorming...
* Howard: There are people for whom that is just not an option. We've talked in conjunction with the nanowrimo thing, there are people who write entire novels on their lunch breaks for a month. But in order to do that, that 45 minute warm-up that I described which a lot of knowledge workers need or think they need is actually spent... they multitask before their lunch break and spend that 45 minutes thinking, "Man, when lunch hits, I've got an hour to write and I'm psyching myself up for it," and then they hit it and they go fast.
* Brandon: When writing time has been more precious to me, I produce much more quickly. When... times in my life when I've had to go to school, when I've had all these other things bugging me, I've found that my writing time is more productive and now that I'm full time, yes, I get more done, but I get... oh boy
* Howard: It didn't scale up.
* Dan: It didn't scale up arithmetically.
* Brandon: There you go. Now I don't have to say any numbers.
* Dan: On the flip side of this, though, one thing that I have noticed about my own habits is that I will underestimate my ability to write in a short space. If I have an hour and a half left before I need to leave, and I think, well, I'm not going to be able to get anything done. And if I actually will sit myself down and force myself to do it, I'll often find a whole chapter comes out the other end in an hour and a half, surprisingly.
* Dan: My schedule, like I said when we are making fun of Howard, was that I get out of bed at eight o'clock, hurriedly get the kids ready for school and send them off, and then I shower and get dressed and leave for work. I do not write at home because I've got a two-year-old who knows where Daddy's office is and if I'm in there, she will be in there too. So it's just much easier for everyone involved. I go actually to a friend's house, he has a spare room he lets me use, and so...

Do you guys listen to music while you're working?

* Dan: Depending on what I'm working on, yes. I will... I set soundtracks for my books depending on what I want the book to feel like. I will go into Internet radio, usually Pandora, and say this is the kind of music I want to listen to and then I will set it up and then I will go. All three books have had very different feels to them musically.
* Brandon: I do something very similar, though it's more what am I in the mood for right now as opposed to matching the scene. Pandora's great. I use that quite often. I use a lot of OC remixes. Howard, music?
* Howard: Music when I work, yes. Music when I'm writing, never.
* Brandon: So when you're drawing, you use music. When you're writing, not.
* Howard: Oh, when I'm drawing -- that's one of the reasons that I do my penciling and my inking at Dragon's Keep, is that when I'm drawing, I can talk. I can participate in a conversation. Because that part of my brain isn't really being used. When I'm penciling, it's a little harder because I have to describe the picture to myself before I start working on it but inking is just tracing is anyone who's watched Jake and Amy knows. But the writing, it has got to be quiet. In fact, sometimes I am sitting down and trying to write, and the kids are noisy, and I will step outside of my office and instruct them that the room outside my office is now off-limits and they need to go upstairs.

So how do you avoid distractions?

* Dan: There are. I have to restrict my Internet usage, I have to restrict my game playing. But most of that is done purely by self-discipline.
* Brandon: For me, I've got to have the right sort of games and things. There are certain things I can do which refill the well. I can sit there and they will keep me thinking and going and won't break... they will bridge...
* Howard: So, solitaire and minesweeper?
* Brandon: Kind of minesweeper type games. They have got to be things that don't take my mental energy. Minesweeper might be too much. If it makes me curious, makes me think. It's got to be brainless games.
* Dan: For me, it's the opposite of that. If I'm trying to brainstorm for something, then yes I want something mindless. But if I'm just refilling the well or recharging my creativity, it has to have a story to it. If it's a puzzle game, I'll think too much about the puzzle and it goes somewhere else...
* Brandon: It can't be a puzzle game for me, though. It's got to be completely mindless. These are the things that I'll be doing while I'm typing. I'll type 3 pages, I hit a point where it's like oh this is a rough patch. I'll stop for five or 10 minutes, do something else which won't take my attention so my brain keeps working on that rough patch and then I'm like oh okay, and then I'm back and keep going.
* Howard: The toughest distraction for me is web browsing and the reason is that I will often sit down and be writing the dialogue and realize I can't finish this dialogue until I've done a spot of research and my research is often Wikipedia or googling military terminology or whatever and as long as the browser is open I might as well check the various Schlock communities and... it's a downhill slope.
* Brandon: This is why I had to stop actually going to forums. I feel bad for my readers because my forums... I don't do many appearances. But -- they're so time consuming and it's interesting and you want to get in there and start talking...

Is your daily schedule rigid or loose?

* Dan: Mine is very loose.
* Howard: Fairly rigid.
* Brandon: I'm going to say mine has been loose in the past, and I have switched recently to a rigid schedule, and it has made me more productive, unfortunately. I used to do it kind of the Bohemian way. I got up when I felt like it, I wrote when I felt like it, I went to bed when I felt like it. I was always productive. So... It was the Wheel of Time. I have such sharp deadlines on this that I said I need to double my productivity. What I decided to do was, I'm going to get up and start working 9 to 5. I'm going to get up, start working and work an eight hour straight block instead of two four-hour blocks.
* Howard: Okay. Did it work? Did it double your productivity?
* Brandon: It hasn't doubled it, but it worked very well because I don't have that lead-in time to each of the four-hour blocks and lead down time. In the four-hour blocks, I was getting about two hours of productive time in the middle of each of them. And now I'm getting six hours of productivity in the middle, and so I think I've added 50%. But I've had to give up my going to bed when I want, getting up when I want. I have to get up at the same time, I have to go and I have to work. No more hanging out with lunches for friends and things like that.
* Dan: Now if that's what you're asking about, then yes, I'm fairly rigid with the times I start and stop, and the times I get up and the times I leave. I actually think it's valuable... beyond just the writing, I think it's very valuable for my children to see that despite the fact that Daddy doesn't really have a real job, he still follows a schedule.
* Brandon: Don't tell them it's not a real job. Don't let everyone in on the secret.
* Dan: I think it's valuable for them to see me leaving in the morning and going to work.

# Season 2 Episode 15 When Do You Know When to Begin Your Story?

When do you begin writing? How do you know if you're ready to start your book?

* Dan: As soon as you say I want to write a book and you sit down and start writing, that's when you're ready to write a book...
* Brandon: Are you sure?
* Dan: That's not necessarily when you start... ready to write... yech. That's not necessarily when you're ready to start writing a good book.
* Howard: That's not necessarily when you are ready to start writing chapters that you are going to keep. You have thrown away some chapters.
* Brandon: I do that a lot. Do you guys do that?
* Dan: I almost always throw away my first one or two chapters.
* Brandon: I think this is an important question to ask because it gives an insight into the minds of writers. When do I start a book? How do I know when I've got a book good enough to start writing it? Because sometimes I have started writing on a book before I was ready and it hurts the book. I have tossed books before even during my professional career when I wasn't ready to start it and usually how I can tell is the first two or three chapters are great. Chapter 4 -- somewhere around there -- it starts to fall apart. What that means is I've run through the first few chapters a lot in my head, I've focused on them, I really know what I'm doing, and then I start working and they come out just like I want them to, and then what? The then what can really throw a big curveball to you.
* Howard: You are an outliner. So what's happening in these situations is your outline is not complete and you're hitting discovery writing and you're not feeling very discoverer...
* Dan: I think I'm very similar to Brandon in that because when I know a book is ready for me to write, is when I know what happens in the middle and at the end. Because otherwise I don't have a book, I just have a beginning. The book itself is, at least for me, it's the ending.

So why don't they start? I want to look at this. Is it fear do you think?

* Dan: I don't think the eternal outliner is doing it out of fear. I think they are doing it because they are too harsh on themselves. They want it to be perfect the first time, and even as an outliner, you have to allow yourself to write a bad draft and then start over and write another draft. You have to be able to work yourself into it.
* Howard: But there is an inherent fear in there -- the fear of failure -- that the outline at some point is going to let you down, and you realize, "Oh, no, I'm a discovery writer for this chapter and I don't know how to bridge this gap..."
* Brandon: And you run into people who... in their head, this book is the platonic ideal of a book. It is not yet, it is potential energy and it is not kinetic. Which means looking at it in their head, it is perfect. It's how they want it to be. It's like when I would try to play jazz actually. I played trumpet all through high school. I loved playing trumpet. When I sat down to try and play jazz, I had not done the legwork. I had not learned my skills to the point that you need to, I was not willing to invest that. I could hear a great jazz tune in my head, nice improv, and when I hit that solo, it never translated to my fingers. And I think there's that problem that they realize this is not going to translate to my fingers.
* Howard: Another way to look at it is that podcast we did on writing the boring bits. You don't outline the boring bits, you outline principal actions. And so unless... if you've outlined and you've actually outlined all of the boring bits, for goodness sake, sit down and write and finish the book because it's already done. But I think they're hitting the boring bits and saying, "Oh, my gosh, my outline wasn't complete."
* Dan: I suspect a lot of it as well is like you are saying is an inherent fear in there of... fear of they look at their outline and say, "This is not yet alive. This is not vibrant enough. I can't start writing it." But that vibrancy won't come into it until you start writing it.
* Brandon: And I do want to throw out the caveat, just a reminder that not everyone fits into one of these two categories exactly. A lot of people discovery write some places and outline other places. The only way to learn how to do this is to practice. And I hate to keep coming back to the same thing, but I honestly get this question a lot in e-mail. How do I know when to start, Brandon? How do I know where to start? Where do I start? You start by practicing. Maybe you'll write the Great American Novel right when you start off practicing, but probably not. The way you learn how to know all these things just instinctively is by doing it and practicing and writing some bad books.

How do you pick the right scene?

* Brandon: Okay, "in late, out early." Start as close to the action as possible. Dan, how do you decide which seem to use to start your books?
* Dan: What I did with Serial Killer was I figured out who the character was, who the bad guy was, how it was going to end, and then just kind of traced it backward and said what is the best way to set this up. You know we often say that your first sentence, your first chapter, is a promise you make to your reader. All right, then, what promise do I want to make? And then I wrote that. It's kind of the thesis statement for the book is how I look at it. This is what I want the book to be about condensed into this capsule.
* Brandon: We've said before, Serial Killer you did a freewrite getting John's voice first and submitted that to writing group telling us this is not going to be chapter 1, this is me trying to get the character locked down
* Brandon: I've been thinking about this a lot because on my next series I haven't come up with the right scene yet which is kind of bothering me. I don't know what the right scene is to start the book. It's a big balancing factor. It's got to introduce the characters strongly, it's got to be exciting, it's got to have a good hook, all of these things and it's sometimes troubling. What do you say to me? Dan, I don't know where to start my next book. I haven't got that scene in my head yet.
* Dan: I think you can look at what is the best possible introduction to this. If you're working on a fantasy series, say well what is this series going to be about? What do I want people... if this is the first thing they look at in the bookstore, what is going to hook them? And more than that, what is going to let them know what is coming? And is that... I want to focus on this character, this is going to be a book about fight scenes, this is going to be a book with really pretty prose in it, and then find the best part of your story that matches that purpose.
* Dan: Another element in this conversation I think is the prologue. You see this a lot especially in fantasy. Whatever the eventual story is going to be about, is a prologue... Game of Thrones is a fantastic example of this.
* Brandon: Gives a promise for the series, and then the first chapter instead gives the promise for the characters of the first book.

# Season 2 Episode 16 World Building – Non-Human Races

Why do you use nonhuman races?

* Howard: I use them because it adds that sense of wonder to the setting.
* Brandon: It's one of the hallmarks of science fiction and fantasy, is that we're dealing with other places, other times, other creatures.
* Brandon: Why do you use nonhuman races? Why did you write a book that has a monster in it killing people rather than just a human killing people?
* Dan: Part of the reason for that is because I was initially aiming for young adults, and thought it would be easier to sell if it was slightly removed from reality. But beyond that, once I actually got into the writing, I realized that a nonhuman monster allowed me to play with the themes a lot more than just a normal human would, 'cause I was able to build rules around this guy and all these other things that would relate with the protagonist in a very different way than a normal human killer would.
* Howard: You don't want to create that, but you can play up a particular physical attribute or mental attribute in such a way that the aliens point up part of your theme.
* Brandon: Exaggeration for use with theme, for use with conflict, it can help you really build your conflict with the nonhuman races are tied to it directly. One of the things I always say is, intermix your conflicts. Make what's important to your characters, important to the plot, important to the world. You can do this really well with nonhuman races. You can do some really interesting parables.
* Brandon: I thought about this a lot when I sat down to write as a fantasy writer. I wanted to not include the Tolkien-esque races. I think that fantasy has moved to a point that we've said, "You know what. We love this. These guys did some great stuff. Let me just play around with some of these concepts that Tolkien didn't get time to explore because he died." But now it's time to move on. And so my books are marked pervasively by a lack of nonhuman races. The reason I don't have a lot of nonhuman races, particularly as viewpoint characters, is because I wanted to focus on the people and make them relatable. It's easier to make someone sympathetic and relatable if they are like you. Having an alien race makes this harder. At the same time, I've felt a little bit of a lack there in my books. You'll notice in my third book, I finally have a viewpoint from a nonhuman race. I did that intentionally because I wanted that sense of wonder. It does add something. And I think it is something that there's a little bit of a hole in, in my work. I think my work will almost always focus mostly on the humans.

How do you make them not one-dimensional?

* Howard: How do you make them not... let me talk about some one-dimensional, or two-dimensional aliens. The Klingons in Star Trek the original series were mysterious and unpredictable. They looked exactly like humans only with a little bit of makeup that made them look like the Mongol Hordes sometimes. And then there was that one episode where the energy monster is making everybody fight and they all decide to laugh and they chase the energy monster out and the Klingon commander says, "It's too bad we didn't get to fight today. It would have been a glorious battle." That line got seized upon by every writer who ever wrote Klingons for Star Trek afterwards as the defining point of the Klingon race and they became two-dimensional. They became gods of war or avatars of war and very little else. The way to avoid doing that is to look at what happened to the Klingons and say, "Oh. Oh wait a minute. Let's not do that. Let's not take a sentence that I wrote in chapter 3 and turn it into not just an important characteristic but a defining theme."
* Dan: The other key example here is Gimli. Since Lord of the Rings, anyone who has ever written a dwarf has essentially just written Gimli. The entire dwarven race is defined by Gimli.
* Brandon: There's our line right there. And I think looking at this, you need to look at each of your characters as a character, that is shaped by their culture and their physiology. A race -- an alien race is going to have a different physiology and a different culture. That will shape who they are. But you've got to give them real conflict, real character drama, real personality that it can be different from every other person in that race. You've got to treat them like a human who's got a little bit of a...
* Brandon: I'm going to back up and kind of correct what I said earlier. Rather than starting with a human and extrapolating, you need to start with a personality and extrapolate, if that makes sense. A person should be influenced by their surroundings and their physiology and their culture, but they've got to be an individual. If you can do this with your races, you can really make stories that shine.
* Dan: The thing we always come back to is conflict. Develop the portions of your race that are going to provide the most interesting conflicts when the character interacts with your other characters.
* Brandon: That's what I would say too. Stay a couple steps ahead of the reader. And if you're working on coming up with really interesting, cool races, make them tied into the conflict like we said before. Make their culture in conflict with the culture of your other races. Work very hard to make this all integrated. And don't worry as much about the parts that aren't going to come out.

# Season 2 Episode 17 Website Marketing for Authors

What do authors do wrong when they put up websites?

* Jordan: What do authors do wrong? Well, one of the things that I think is the biggest mistake they do is they don't update their website constantly. They only update it right as a new book comes out, which for an author is usually only about once a year, once every two years, depending on the author. So you... me as somebody who's going to that website and says I like this author, I want to keep up-to-date... you don't have anything that keeps me coming back so I may forget about...
* Brandon: A lot of authors don't update. I will say, I see author websites as fulfilling two or three different functions. The first function is I am introducing my work and myself to potential readers. And in that case, you don't have to have a lot of updates. You might as well just throw up a static page and leave it be. Then there's the I'm giving extra content and bonus material to raise the value of my books, to keep people coming back. The main reason being hey, if you spent this much money on one of my books I want you to get this added value and hand-in-hand you'll remember about my books so then a year later when the book comes out to go and buy it.
* Jordan: Well, one of the things they don't do is they don't keep people up-to-date with what's going on with their books. I mean, one of the things you can do is just get an RSS feed and then just post every few months, "This book's coming along great. This is what I'm working on."
* Howard: If you've got an RSS feed -- an RSS feed is awesome, an author with an RSS feed needs to be using that feed more than once every 20,000 words. They need to be using that feed to say, "and I'm going to be at Dragon Con this week and I'm going to be at Infocom next week and..."
* Jordan: Say where you're going to be. But let people know you're still alive and still writing. George RR Martin is one -- a lot of my coworkers absolutely love him and they get so frustrated because they go to his website and he'll talk about all this other stuff that's going on 'cause he likes to just post -- he's like fark but for science fiction and fantasy on his website apparently, but he never tells people what's actually going on with his books -- so no one has no idea if he's actually currently writing or not.
* Brandon: The number one thing I get positive feedback on, and it's such a simple thing -- it's not the annotations, though I do get a lot of good feedback on those. It's not the deleted scenes. It's not even the free books, the free short stories. It's thank you for having a progress bar. I like to know... at least I got a sense of how far along you are. That's the easiest thing to update. But people love it. They love being able to see, "Okay, the book is 50% done. This means that..."
* Brandon: The third one would be getting people to your signings... It's very useful. I'll give an example. Dave Farland and I went on book tour together last year. We've done it a number of years. We sell equivalent numbers of books. We would get to the signings and invariably there would be 30 people there for me and one or two for him. And I felt really bad for him. It's not like he's not selling any books. But I have on my website a lot of outreach with readers... His readers don't know that it's happening and I'm able to get them there. Using my website for a newsletter and these sorts of e-mailing people when I'm going to be in their area, these sorts of things... been extremely useful and you know, we could do a whole podcast on whether book signings are that useful, that's a whole can of worms itself, but if you're going to have one, you want people to show up. When people show up, the bookstore says, "Wow, he's important." So the people at the bookstore then pay more attention to your books, they feel that they got their... they invite you back...
* Jordan: And then your friends and family don't have to show up to every signing so that you don't look lonely all the time you're there.
* Howard” I make my living off it. What I'd really like to actually do is counsel people who aren't yet published authors. What do they do with their website? Step one, if you can, go out and get your name as a domain name. If you're John Smith, I'm sorry, you're boned. If you're John Scalzi, well, it would've been great if there wasn't already a John Scalzi. But go out and get your name. First and foremost because as an author or aspiring author, your name is your brand. Your name is your stock in trade. I was a little disappointed with Dave Farland because I could find Dave Farland dot net but Dave Wolverton isn't branded as a domain name. If it is, I couldn't find it.
* Brandon: He's had all sorts of problems with the movie deal as well. In that... and this is something maybe to be aware of. Once he sold movie rights, they wanted all Runelords style... all searches to go to the movie website. He had to give over everything to them.
* Jordan: I want to make a comment on that. Howard, on what you think about people who may not want to invest in a website or hosting -- I mean, domain names are like seven bucks a year and hosting you can get for like three or four dollars a year
* Brandon: Or free. Oh, holaservers. I can mention Earl's servers. Go to holaservers with an h.
* Howard: But coming back to what it is that these authors or aspiring authors need -- get a website and commit to keeping that thing up to date. Okay, so you're not doing appearances, you're not doing signings, you're not doing any of that -- at least say I'm working on a story.
* Brandon: You know what -- here's another thing to point out -- editors are techies -- a lot of them. They will probably Google you. In fact, I was talking to a friend who had just submitted to a publisher. The editor had actually looked at the manuscript, was really thinking of accepting it and it's still kind of up in the air, but she told me -- my friend said -- she googled me, found my LiveJournal, and was reading up on me and my work ethic and all of these things. So, a lot of people maintain a website simply as a resume.
* Howard: And that's what I was going to come back to, is that you then print yourself a 100 or a 1000 business cards with your website on it...
* Brandon: Business cards for free -- you can get free business cards from Vistaprint. You can do all this stuff for free. [note: shipping and handling extra]
* Howard: But then you go to conventions and somebody wants to know who you are. "Oh, I'm Howard Tayler and here's my card with my URL and whatever else on it." And that makes it so much easier for me because, as is obvious, I don't like the sound of my own voice and I don't want to be talking, much.
* Dan: Now, Howard brought up -- or no, it was you, Brandon, who brought up editors googling you and seeing your work ethic and things like that. I think we could can of worms the concept of branding itself altogether, but once you have a web presence, you need to be careful with what you put on that web presence. Very careful.
* Howard: It's... as a random blogger, it's fun to rant about religion or politics or social issues or whatever. But the moment you become a commercially viable property, those things can come back to haunt you.
* Brandon: Be aware, some people like to do it. And it's fine if you go into it -- if this is one of your deals. Yeah, but know that they are going to come back to bite you and the things that you don't expect to come back to bite you, will. Example -- I wrote an essay back in the day, back before I was published, called How Tolkien Ruined Fantasy, I believe is what it was called. And when we first started my website and when I first sold rights and a book was coming out, Jordan nicely imported all the essays I had written for the Timewaster's Guide and right on front was How Tolkien Ruined Fantasy. If you read that essay, the point was Tolkien was so often... he was ahead of his era, and the rest of us took 20 years to catch up. So it's a very laudatory essay for Tolkien. Most people don't read... They see that and think, "There is that punk new author that hates Tolkien." I had to rename the essay -- Actually I Don't Hate Tolkien, Read the Essay. Because it was right there on the front page. These sorts of things. And then it'll go all around the web. But something else to remember is web memory, people's memory of you, is fleeting in most cases. You'll make stupid things, you'll embarrass yourself, you'll stick your foot in your mouth, and you'll be the flavor of the week -- and then it will pass. If you don't do it consistently, you'll be okay.
* Dan: Your mistakes though -- and this was a really big thing back when I worked in advertising and marketing -- it's important to remember that the web is a far more permanent medium than most of us have ever dealt with before. Your mistakes will last much longer on the Internet than they ever would on TV for example, or on the radio.
* Brandon: There you go. The other thing I wanted to mention is when it comes down to designing your website remember that you want to get it right on your first try if you possibly can. Jordan mentioned this to me earlier. We didn't build my website to be scalable and so it didn't serve my needs as I grew and I grew and I grew. Anyway...
* Jordan: I'm gonna counter that. I'm going to say that you can never build a perfect website, especially the first time. What you need to do is you need to build your website to the best you can, and pay somebody to do it if you can, or get a friend to do it. But what you need to do is you need to come back -- say after people start coming, after about 4 to 6 months -- start looking at where they are going and what they're doing and then redesigned it based off of those people's needs, because until you actually know what your audience wants, it's very hard for you actually to design a proper website.

# Season 2 Episode 18 World Building Governments

What types of government do we see a lot used in fantasy and science fiction?

* Brandon: Monarchy. Let's talk about the monarchy. Is it overused?
* Brandon: I would agree that I think it's oversimplified but... each book... I've said this before, each time you write a novel, you can't focus on everything. Sometimes you gotta focus on religion in your book, that's what's important to the conflict of your characters, sometimes you work on the government. I would say that I don't think that the monarchy is overused because one of the reasons people read fantasy is for that kind of harkening back to a simpler day when a single individual can rule a kingdom...
* Brandon: You can have a single identified... it's harder in a culture with a... say, like what we've got, a democracy, to vilify one person. It does happen quite a bit, but... In this, you can have a monarchy -- evil king or this good king -- these sorts of things. It can boil your plot down, make it a little bit easier.
* Howard: Well, and even in a... even if you've world built a democracy or a republic, in order to vilify the government, you have to give it a face, and that means picking somebody –
* Dan: I think as common as the monarchy is, it is becoming much more common, I think, right now, the trend is toward a more complex kind of monarchy. It is not a sole ruler ruling absolutely. There's a lot of parliament, there's a lot of councils, and I think that's just a reflection maybe or maybe just an advancement of how we think about politics in our culture.

How do you do government right?

* Dan: Well, I think, first you need to look at, why do you want politics to be an important part of your book? What elements of your plot are related to the politics, and how can you tie that into the setting? If it's a near future thing, if you're going for cyberpunk, one of my favorites is the privatized government and does that work? Does it work for your story? Can you make it work? What ideas can you pull out of that and build conflicts on?
* Brandon: So point number one -- tie it in. Make sure it's tied in. Let me also separate out... I once went up to pitch one of my books and I said it's really a political book, and the person stopped me and said, "Political intrigue. Those are two different things. When you come in and say political intrigue, that's probably what you mean, right?" And I said, "Yeah, that's what I mean. There's a lot of political intrigue." When we say if you want politics to be important to your book, what we're meaning is political intrigue -- machinations between different factions in the government, this kind of thing.
* Dan: Now one thing that we come back to every podcast it seems is conflict. And so, look for the points of conflict in your government. And I think a fabulous example of this is the new Battle Star Galactica which takes the conflict between a military and the civilian government and has them constantly at odds with each other and that feeds the plot, it drives the show, and...
* Brandon: and without satirizing, and it can be interesting -- one of the reasons we write science fiction and fantasy. Case in point. Elantris. The starting point for the government in Elantris was what if someone set up an MLM [multilevel marketing, a.k.a. network sales] where you get different ranks in the monarchy based on how much you earn. This was the basic idea. I took a slightly different direction and I simplified it a little bit, but that's really what it was. The king is running an MLM and everyone gets ranked in the monarchy based on this stuff. I thought that was really interesting.
* Dan: Well, I think this is the same principle as the magic podcast that we have done. The reason for using a government in your plot is because the decision-making process that governs... that rules that is important. And so you need to know enough about the government to make the flow of that decision sensible to your reader.
* Howard: A rewording of Sanderson's First Law would be appropriate, and that is that the more the reader knows about the political rules -- the political processes in your world -- the more able the protagonist is to use it to solve problems. That's a great point. Thanks for making that, Brandon.
* Brandon: Does the main character -- can they get as much food as they want? Do they have to work? What are the gender roles that force them to do this or that? Can they move? Can they move from city to city? That's a very big thing to ask yourself. Can a common citizen have a weapon? If so, can they carry it around with them? These sorts of things really define what type of government you have.
* Howard: Another fun way to approach it -- and I've done this -- is to try to come up with names for government offices that you know you've never seen before. So president is out, prime minister is out, king, emperor, whatever, those are all out. Come up with something new. And then when you've got that word, like well gosh... and maybe the word ties into biology. I named a sergeant in the [testrata?] I think I named that title, instead of being sergeant, was foretooth because it's the frontmost tooth in the jaw. That sort of thing can lend itself well to creating a system of government from scratch.
* Brandon: Take a couple of steps. I often say this, but say I've got a monarchy, but let's take two steps away and say how it's going to be different. Mistborn. I'm going to have a theocracy. One step away, how's it going to work? Well, I'm going to run my theocracy more like a bureaucracy where the priests are really the only people who can make binding contracts.
* Brandon: Run by a God-Emperor. It's one step away, and I like what you say. I did it. I named them obligators instead of priests. It's one step away, and say...
* Howard: Oh, yeah. Obligator is a great name because it describes their job -- we sum up the obligations. Awesome.

# Season 2 Episode 19 Do Creative Writing Classes Help?

Where writing classes helpful?

* Dan: My classes were very useful. Though I think they were more useful on the business side and the network side than they were on the actual writing skills side. The class we met in was taught by Dave Farland. I learned more about the business of writing in that class than I had ever learned before. That's where I learned that writing is not only something fun to do, but it's a viable career. That was the first time that anyone stood up and said, "You can make a living doing this, and I'm going to tell you how." That made the entire class worthwhile.
* Brandon: I will agree 100%. I never took another class that did that. I think that most universities don't have classes that do that. Seems like creative writing education doesn't focus a lot on that. Though I want to expand this to greater than just classes. I want to talk about listening in on panels at cons. I want to talk about reading books on creative writing. Generally, is it useful? How is it useful? How can you make use of it?
* Howard: I majored in music. And then did tech support, and then product management. 10 years in the software industry. And started writing again because web cartooning seemed like a fun way to tell a story. But I didn't really get good at the storytelling until I started doing it for a while and then started looking... going to conventions and looking at the way people were crafting stories and realized, "Wow. This stuff actually applies to me." Recently, with the current storyline -- and I've mentioned this before in podcasts -- The Longshoreman of the Apocalypse storyline, I took Act I and Act II, completed, printed them out and sat down with Bob Defendi and Dan Willis and told them, "Okay, you read those. Now you read my notes for Act III. Now let's sculpt Act III together." And we applied... they both have lots of creative writing expertise, and I've been spending time with you guys and... osmosis, some of that has rubbed off. And I had somebody post in LiveJournal today... and they said, "Wow, these characters, they really... this is really awful. This is..." Blame my friend Bob, because he told me, "Your characters never hit rock bottom." And I thought about it and I realized, "Yeah, they don't." I keep backing away from that. This time, the bottom has rocks in it.
* Brandon: If you want to be a writer... a lot of times people will say, don't major in English if you want to be a writer. Major in something that will give you a lot of experience and interesting things to write about. I went through an English degree. It was useful for me partially because my creative writing classes, for which I was doing writing anyway just on my spare time, I could turn that in and get grades on it. It made things a lot easier. But... it made things a lot easier and sometimes you don't want the easy way. I would say creative writing classes can be very useful, but you have to know what they are going to give you. Most creative writing classes will not talk about the business end of things. Books will. There are lots of good books out there. Writing to Sell by Scott Meredith. Orson Scott Card's book is a very good one, How to Write Science Fiction and Fantasy. Stephen King's On Writing is a very good book about the actual nuts and bolts of writing. But there are a lot of other books out there that will talk about the metaphysics of writing and how it feels to be a writer and expressing your inner whatever and this sort of stuff. That can be useful, most creative writing classes seem to focus a lot on that. Discovering your inner artist.
* Brandon: Though I will say, creative writing classes, one of the nice things they gave me, was community. Meaning a community of writers where I met other writers who were struggling with the same things.
* Dan: But as we talked about in a previous podcast, you can get a lot of that through a good writing group or local writing...
* Howard: conventions...

# Season 2 Episode 20 Marketing 101 for Creators

What's the difference between marketing and PR?

* Rob Wells: I think the technical definition is that PR is trying to get a message out there. And basically all that it is... it's one fourth of what marketing is. Marketing is very generally defined as the 4P's, and those are Pricing, Promotion, Positioning, and Product. And promotion is really what public relations is. Promotion is the advertising. It's the getting information out there. And so marketing is much more the strategy. Marketing is everything else that goes into it before you can ever get to that public relations, telling people about your stuff.
* Brandon: I know that at Tor, I have a publicist who is a different individual from the marketing manager. And I go to them for different things. My publicist, for me, is the person who will set up my signings and will come up with posters and will do little sketches with me and things like this. Whereas the marketing manager is the person that is buying advertising and is putting stuff on the book and determining what to sell it for and this sort of thing.
* Rob: This will illustrate more of what marketing is. Like I said, it's those four things -- it's promotion, and that's kind of when we talk about publicists -- and when you say we're getting the marketing going... one of the biggest things of marketing is the product, and before you can even get to the product stage, which is the writing itself, before you can even get to that, they have positioning. Which is really where you start out, that's where you say, all right, this is what I'm going for.
* Dan: Who am I telling this to.
* Rob: Yeah, who am I selling to, what makes me different?
* Rob: I don't want to interrupt or get off on a tangent, but there's a story that I just absolutely love that marketers study in a business context, even though it's about artists. I find it so interesting. A couple of years ago, there were two Russian artists that wanted to do... basically look at what the market wanted for art, but they went about it in this very over-the-top performance art way. They went and actually got a market research firm to poll all Americans... well a sample of all Americans, to find out which style... Find out what style of art they liked, find out what colors they liked in the picture, find out what subject matter they wanted it to be about, find out all of these things, and then they created a painting that matched exactly what the public wanted. And so they found out that the public likes realism, they like landscapes, they like blue, they like pictures of children, and they like pictures of historical figures. And so... it's the funniest picture you ever saw. It's absolutely bland and worthless. It's a landscape -- there's a lake and a mountain -- and it's all in kind of blue colors because that's what people wanted. And there's some kids running around in the grass, and then there's George Washington sitting in the middle. And I think that's kind of the folly of...
* Brandon: This is good. Authors need to know this. I teach a class at the local university about writing and I hadn't realized until just recently -- I was going through giving critiques on some of the writing -- a lot of people don't know their market. And not knowing who you're writing for is a problem. They were trying to do something ridiculous, I think. They were trying to prove that you can't write for the market exactly. But knowing your market is useful. You can go too far, but you can go too far the other way as well. I've had writers... I'm reading their books and I say, "Is this YA? Is this middle grade? Is this adult? Is it humor, is it not humor?" And they don't know. There's a little bit of everything in the book. You would think, oh, it's got a little bit of everything, that's great. Actually, no, it's terrible, it's a train wreck, it's a disaster. And sometimes you can make it work, but you do it intentionally. You can break any rule if you do it intentionally. Inevitably, these authors will say I don't know. And that's okay in the classes they're doing. They're trying different things. But if they don't settle down on what they're trying to do, they're going to have issues figuring out... they're going to have issues selling it, because they don't know what they're writing.
* Rob: I think this goes back to... one of the 4Ps is positioning. The two artists when they were make in the picture -- they knew exactly what was demanded by the market, but they didn't do anything to differentiate themselves. They didn't say this is why we're better than anything else. That's classic positioning, is where you say, "All right, I'm writing this, and it is similar to what the market wants in these ways but it is better than what's out there in these other ways."
* Brandon: What they're doing is they're exploring different things. What I say to them is eventually you're going to have to settle on something. You're going to have to decide what's the age group. Age group is really important when you are writing books. Knowing what age group you're targeting, very important.
* Brandon: Alcatraz. I did have to reposition. Alcatraz... I sent it to the editors and the editors came back and said, "You have the character at 15, he needs to be younger because the humor is targeted at a younger audience. It's middle grade."
* Howard: What was it they said, where middle grade readers want to have a hero who is their age or maybe a little younger?
* Brandon: A little older. A couple of years older. And they said, "You can't have... you can, but it's better to not have a 15-year-old. It's better to have a 13-year-old cause you're targeting 11-year-olds." And that's because I was using a type of humor which I think... humor... adults will find it funny too, anyone will find it funny, but the target is me at age 12. Quirky, intelligent humor, but silly. Silly humor works for middle grades. Silly humor doesn't work as well for YA. And understanding that is an important deal.
* Brandon: Right. You have to say... you're not just writing fantasy. What type of fantasy writer are you? Are you the fantasy writer who's writing the gruff, warriors fighting on the walls type of fantasy? Are you writing the sweeping character drama epic fantasy? Are you writing the small adventures in a mystery style fantasy? What is the tone, what message do you want your readers to get? This is kind of in looking at what your cover would be before you even publish.
* Howard: Before you even have a cover. And the cover is one of those things where the marketing manager is going to work with the artist and say, "Hey, here's the message, here's what we've come up with." And hopefully the artist is on message.
* Brandon: That's where the Mistborn covers came from. When I talked to the art director at Tor, she said, "Well, what I know of the books was this is nonstandard epic fantasy with a dark edge." That's what she wanted to get across on the covers. And so that's why the covers are what they were. That's where she was going. If it conveyed that, she considered it to be successful. An author, we say I want the covers to be pretty. But that's not what the art director [garbled -- thinking?
* Rob: And so often, the authors want... well, obviously, an author would want the cover to be accurate to what's in the book but that's not even really what the art director's going for.
* Brandon: They don't care. They want to get the right message.
* Rob: When people are walking through bookstores, I think the average is that someone -- when they look at the book and they actually look at it rather than just walking past it -- they'll give it between, I think it's 11 and 15 seconds worth of time and so that cover has to sell them on the message and who cares if they get the details wrong. If it gets someone to pick it up, flip through it -- that's the point.
* Brandon: The cover is... is this the type of... this is the type of book you like, is what the cover is saying. Then they read the copy and see if they're intrigued enough to actually buy the book.
* Dan: That's why your message has to be so defined, at least in your head, because then when you have that 10 second opportunity to grab someone in a bookstore, you're ready for it.
* Brandon: Right. And you're going to be using that to grab your editors before you get published.

# Season 2 Episode 21 Fight Scenes

* Brandon: All right, I'm going to give one. I've got one. I often say this when people ask me. The first thing I come up with is, I say, "You are not writing a screenplay." Which, if you are writing a screenplay, then this rule doesn't apply to you.
* Brandon: Jackie Chan can have a 30 minute fight scene which is just a blow-by-blow and it's transfixing. We'll watch it, we'll enjoy it, it's exciting. If you describe that exact same thing in a book, no matter how well you describe it, it's going to be boring. And so my advice on fight scenes -- first piece of advice -- is play to the strengths of your medium, play to the strengths of your genre. If you are writing novels, don't try to write them like a movie.
* Rob Wells: I was going to add the same thing. I think that the key when I have been writing action scenes is to make sure that there's lots of emotion. And whether that is the attacker is really angry or whether the people being attacked are scared for their lives, just as long as there is that tension and conflict, so it isn't like you said a blow-by-blow.
* Brandon: In a novel, one of the main things we can do that they can't do in a movie is we can be more explicit with the emotions. We can show the emotions and the thoughts of characters much more distinctly.
* Howard: The result of this is the discontinuity between the big battle scenes in Return of the King the book and the big battle scenes in Return of the King the movie. In order to do those battle scenes emotionally the way Tolkien described them, Return of the King would have been rated X. the violence just would have been over the top because for us to experience that measure of horror, that would have been required. So they had to step it down, they had to re-translate Tolkien's work for the screen.
* Brandon: Yeah. And you as a writer... a lot of us nowadays, we've seen a lot of movies. We've essentially been raised on cinema. And so authors, and sit down and want to write a great fight scene, they imagine Jackie Chan or whatever your favorite action hero is, they imagine that and they start writing a blow-by-blow and it's bad, it's boring.
* Brandon: You can actually get away with that sometimes. And I'll step away and say with some really... in writing, you would call it poetic language, in a graphic novel, you would say it's just a visually compelling scene. You can get away with these sometimes. You can do a couple paragraphs or maybe even a page of this is just beautiful writing. Lots of concrete detail, people are fighting, and the mud is flying into the air, and the sunlight is casting shadows, and the smoke is rising from where the shells have hit...
* Howard: But that's not a blow-by-blow. You're casting an emotional picture with those descriptions.
* Brandon: No, it's not. At that point, you're doing the descriptions... you're doing beautiful descriptions, you're not doing a blow-by-blow.
* Rob: Well, and I think, another thing that you guys have mentioned on here before, just about writing in general, is that whenever you are writing something, it needs to have more than one purpose. And so I think if you're just writing something for the blow-by-blow, it doesn't help. But if you have a fight scene and you know that there is... maybe someone is trying to accomplish something and someone is trying to stop them... and so you can have the fight scene while the other stuff is going on, or you can have a fight scene while the conversation is going on...
* Brandon: That's a great thing to do. Exactly. Having them fight during a conversation, if you can make it rational, can be a wonderful way to make it exciting.
* Brandon: Step back a moment though. When I say you don't want to do a blow-by-blow, I'm not saying that you can get away with bad blocking. We still need to be able to visualize where everybody is and what they're doing and what's going on.
* Dan: And I think that's one of the biggest mistakes. I mean, people are very quick to new blow-by-blow, but then we also forget that we are in a non-visual medium. Not comics, but novels... we don't know exactly what the room looks like, we don't know where the chairs are, and so when a character picks one up and hits the other character with it, that might come out of nowhere for us.
* Brandon: You need to set up very well. Good blocking is essential for a good fight scene. People need to be able to picture it in visualize it in their head. But you don't than just want to spend pages and pages of showing them fighting, boom, boom, boom, boom.
* Brandon: What else can fight scenes do in a book? I would say that one thing that makes fight scenes work really well is making them goal-based. This is kind of something that Rob was talking about earlier, but... because we can show thoughts and emotions, we can show what the character is trying to accomplish, and we can show progression as they step toward it or away from it. They can say, "Oh, I see that cliff over there. I'm going to try and fence my opponent over there so they stumble and fall off." You can do this sort of goal-based fighting. It worked very well in the end of the serial killer book when you got... When you get to the end of the serial killer book, there are some nice action sequences, and we understood the character's motivations and goals, and because of that, the sense of progression as he either achieved or failed those various goals made the fight sequences very powerful.
* Dan: Well, and it's... especially in my book and in a lot of horror where you are not dealing with action characters... any fight scene that does not have trained combatants in it, is not going to be like a movie action scene. You need to think about these other things. You have to think about the goals and the emotions, cause... if I were to go outside right now and pick a fight with somebody, that's all I would really have. I don't have training to fall back on, I'm not a good fighter, but I do know what I'm trying to do and why.
* Howard: I read a book by Steven Barnes and, I can't remember the title, but Steven Barnes is a master of several martial arts. Yes, there was a lot of blocking, a lot of blow-by-blow in there, but one of the things that he conveyed very effectively was that our protagonist does not know what he is doing and it is terrifying every time he comes up against somebody because he knows they know more about this than he does and he's going to get his head handed to him in a basket. And it was very, very well thought out and blocked out and the goal through all this was, "I want to live. I want to live. I want to live."
* Brandon: What do you guys think of abstracting out fight scenes? Some authors, Robert Jordan is one of them, like to make things a little more abstract and say... okay, they pull back and do a wide shot and say, "this happened." The fight scenes will usually be very quick.
* Rob: And the mode of battle turned.
* Brandon: Robert Jordan does a little bit more focused. He gives all of his fighting... all of his sword forms... he names them, like Boar Rushing Down a Hill or something like this. "He fell into Boar Rushing down a Hill" and that gives you a kind of abstract image of he's charging through and cutting people down.
* Howard: With a name like that, you can get away with the abstraction.
* Dan: I actually greatly prefer abstracted fight scenes. When I get into a book that is really giving me a lot of detail on how the combat is going, I just zone out cause it bores me. Now let me give the counter example. My favorite fight scene in any book ever is the poison knife fight in Dune. And that is a very direct, blow-by-blow fight, but we get every single thought that they have, we know all of the strategy behind... not even the moves, but the moves behind the moves, and the clothes he is wearing. It is hyper detailed, but I love that for whatever reason.
* Howard: And it is a metaphor for the political machinations that were similarly multilayered in that book.
* Dan: Like Rob was saying, it serves about 10 purposes.
* Brandon: Since we're throwing out effective ones, I'm going to go for a book that has some of my favorite fight scenes which are very effective and very detailed and that's Ender's Game. And in that case, they're not abstracted out. And if you look at Ender's Game, what's going on is... and this is how I like to write my fight scenes... you're showing the characters being clever by manipulation of their surroundings and their tools. And so it's less... a fight becomes a problem-solving exercise instead of a great action sequence.

# Season 2 Episode 22 Marketing 201: Branding Yourself

* Rob Wells: Okay, there are two... there are a million definitions of brand and everyone defines it different ways but the two that I think are the most important... one, very simply, a brand is a promise of value. So when a company has a brand like Coke or Apple, you know when you see Coke or Apple, or you see things that have that logo, or you see a commercial for Coke, that it is promising a certain amount of value that you can rely on.
* Rob Wells: The second definition... And this is the more important when you are setting strategy even as authors... well, it's easier to define by what it isn't. A brand is not a jingle. A brand is not a slogan. So the brand of Writing Excuses has nothing to do with... well it has something to do with the slogan "15 minutes long cause you're in a hurry and we're not that smart." That is not the brand. A brand is not the cover, a brand is not your name. Instead a brand is... A brand exists only in the minds of your consumers and what it is, is that it is the sum total of all of your customers' perceptions about all the interactions they have with you. And basically what that means is that every perception that they have when they come into contact with your book, your cover, you at a book signing, fan mail that they send to you, your website -- interaction with that, your blog... everything... It all goes together and the sum total of all those perceptions is what your brand is.
* Brandon: Right now, for most of our listeners, your customers are editors only, really, right now. Or potential customers as you build your website and start to build a following even before you get published. But this is good stuff to practice.
* Dan: This is what we were talking about our website podcast with -- be careful what you put online. Because that's all part of your brand. It's part of your perception from your audience. So people will read your work and they'll think one thing and then if they get on your website and see something entirely different, that will confuse them. If they see you in person and get an entirely different message, that will... you're sending very mixed signals. You're not on the message.
* Brandon: Yeah. Jay Lake really did a good job of branding himself, during the era before he was... he has novels out right now... back then he was publishing short stories, he was doing anthologies, he was going to the conventions... and when you saw Jay Lake, he always was wearing Hawaiian shirts, which was part of his brand but wasn't his brand. His brand was, "I am a fun guy who writes serious literary science fiction." And he was able to combine those two things in some very interesting ways. And all of his interactions pointed toward that. When he met people, you got this sort of sense of that. When he would give his readings... he would do readings, he would have a chorus of women who would chant with him. He would... these very avant-garde readings which would have door prizes and people chanting and there'd be parties with these... really like hippies meet beatniks meet... that guy who sang on the beach? Mel Torme? I don't know. He had this whole big thing going which was really cool and he branded himself.
* Rob: What I write is... I write humor, and even my political thrillers are humor. What happened is I wrote my first one, it's a romantic comedy, you get the humor. And it all sells very well and that is the brand that I established. I actually, even without knowing the tactics of it, I set this up on my website, it was about humor. And my second book came out, it was a political thriller that had a lot of humor in it. It's kind of styled after... I was inspired by Hugh Laurie's The Gun Seller where it is very violent, very action and very serious issues, but at the same time, just tons of humor in there. So I tried to do that with my second book -- kind of take that route -- and it was just marketed absolutely horribly.
* Brandon: It was marketed as if it were the same book as the first one.
* Rob: The cover of it said, "A hilarious new adventure from the author of On Second Thought" which is the name of my first book. And so people were... it was sold as this is another book exactly like this romantic comedy.
* Rob: It sold terribly. And when my third book came out, we actually had to completely rebrand it. My third book is actually a sequel to the second, but they distanced themselves in the cover, in the promotion, everything about it. They distanced themselves and said, "We want to really play up the political thriller angle of this."
* Howard: This comes back to what we talked about with Dave Wolverton/David Farland where he was a science fiction writer, no wait is a fantasy writer, no wait he's a science fiction writer...
* Brandon: And he re-branded himself... People get away with doing different things. Lee Modesitt does not rebrand for his science-fiction and his fantasy. He feels that his science-fiction will sell... the name brand just means great writer is what he's trying to brand himself as. And he thinks it's more narrow... or more broad. Some people like Dave think it's more narrow and he'll rebrand with a different name. Not everyone does the same why. I think there's an argument here.
* Dan: And I think that this highlights the need for this very top-down, high-level strategic approach because like Rob said, his brand was there even when he didn't know how to build a brand, you're building one anyway. Your interactions with your audience are building a brand whether you like it or not, and so you need to know going in to it what impression you want to give. And if Rob had gone in saying, "my brand is going to be humorous books that are well-written and that involve different kinds of genres," then that could have incorporated both under the umbrella. But as it was, he built his brand as "this is romantic comedy," and then nothing else fit.
* Brandon: There's not been a lot of crossover between my children's book and my adult books. I think it's this thing. The Alcatraz books have had to rebrand completely. And that works because I'm in a different section of the bookstore there. That hurts me and that helps me. It hurts me because my readers who read my epic fantasy can't try my comedies, my children's books.
* Howard: Well, it hurts you because momentum in one genre is not boosting sales in another.
* Brandon: But it also helps me in that it allows me to rebrand. People don't pass the books in the children shelf and automatically think, "Oh, it's that guy who writes those other things, obviously he can't write this." And so... personally I think it's hurting me more than it's helping me, but there is an argument to be said there.
* Rob: One thing before we run out of time that I think we need to hit on is why is any of this important at all? One thing with branding that I think a lot of customers and consumers, all of us included, don't like to admit but it is proven over and over again scientifically is that we make a lot of decisions not based on logic and anything, but it's based on perception. As a matter of fact, there was a study released a week ago talking about -- and this isn't related to branding, but it's the same, it's related to perception -- people are more willing to purchase something if they have held before. And why is that? There's no logical reason for it, there's no reason for it. It's just that they have gained this new perception of the thing by holding it and feeling it. And so when we talk about branding... I had a branding professor, and this sounds callous and evil, and he said, "I'll warn you, this is callous and evil but it's the truth, marketing is brain control." What you are doing when you are branding yourself, when you are putting out a message, when you're molding everything toward that message, is you are trying to control everyone's perceptions of you. It's no different than if you are going on a date with a girl and you are trying to control her perceptions of you, and trying to make her like you. You do things in such a way that make her think, "Oh, he's a gentleman, he's very charming."
* Brandon: These are all good things to be aware of. The more that you understand about the process, the more you understand about what goes on in creating books and in marketing books, I think the better you will be able to handle this all. And you can come up with strategies. A lot of authors, just kind of by accident, allowed their brand to become the series and not the person. Which in some cases is good, in some cases is bad. Some authors -- Orson Scott Card is a good example -- brand themselves as an author more strongly in many ways than they brand themselves as a series. And when they jump to other things, they get away with it more. Some other authors have a lot of trouble. They brand the character really well, the series really well, and then get locked into it. Some people, they don't care, they love that, that they get locked into it. Other people, it drives them crazy that they can't ever escape this one series that had done very well for them. And so if you as an author are someone who thinks you want to write a lot of disparate sorts of things, be aware of this and brand yourself as an author rather than as a series.
* Brandon] I actually intentionally didn't write a sequel to Elantris. One of the main reasons I didn't is... I wasn't thinking in marketing terms. But as I look at it, that I didn't want to be branded as this series author. I wanted to be branded as someone who is able to consistently write interesting worlds and magic systems in books that you enjoy reading.
* Dan: Well, and... I'm running into that problem right now is I start to work on other projects. I've finished the first trilogy that I sold... Yeah, and I've got other various editors that I've talked to, other editors that we pitched the first series to, and they all want more serial killer books from me, and I don't want to be the serial killer guy. I would like to have a wider thing than that. So it's a dangerous line to walk.
* Dan: For aspiring authors, for our audience... that's primarily new authors trying to break in, to what degree should they be concerned about branding? What should they do right now at this point in their career, branding wise?
* Rob: I think that the biggest thing is, they need to get their name out there, and they need to, even now, as they are looking forward, they don't even have an agent yet, they need to be controlling whatever their brand is. A statistic from business, but I'm sure that it applies just as well to editors and agents, is that 80% of HR managers before they hire someone will google them. That's scary, if you think about it. All the stuff that I know is out on the web about me, and I'm even trying to control what's out there about me.
* Brandon: Editors do it. I can guarantee they do it.
* Rob: Well, and one important thing to note, is that there is no right way and wrong way to do this. If you are writing chick lit and humor, then you can totally go ahead and you can blog about American Idol and you can do all this stuff. But if you are trying to brand yourself as like a serious literary author who's the next John Steinbeck, then totally that's not the way that you want to go. So there's no right way or wrong way, there's no do this, don't do that, just make sure that you're on message.

# Season 2 Episode 23 Avoiding the Cliche

* Tracy Hickman: How do you avoid writing cliched characters?
* Brandon: Yeah, how do you make your characters three-dimensional?
* Tracy: Well, you can use any number of rendering programs that will make your characters three-dimensional.
* Tracy: You've got to deal with characters that have flaws. Everybody has these paragons of virtue that come into their books, but they've all got to have flaws. And this makes them more real. So you need to find all kinds of strange flaws. I used to do this in my role-playing games. I had a character who decided that he had a dreadful fear of rope. Man, what are you going to do in a dungeon if you have to haul something, right? So he had a dreadful... you'd be surprised at just how many things you can do, with even little simple phobias and problems.
* Brandon: Okay, so what you're saying there... what I'm picking out of that is flaws that don't just do the normal stuff. I mean, if someone was going to pick a phobia, they'd probably pick arachnophobia or one of these normal things. Adding in...
* Howard: Why did it have to be snakes?
* Brandon: Yeah, adding in snakes makes Indiana Jones more three-dimensional.
* Tracy: Exactly. And it's something that you always remember about them, because that's what their problem is. Even in the Da Vinci Code, the Langdon character has this terrible fear of enclosed spaces and it becomes part of the evolution of the book as it moves forward. So you can find these flaws or these quirks in places, but even more than quirks or flaws, just basic fundamental issues, things that are missing in their personalities, some aspect that is missing, that rounds that out really well.
* Brandon: I think in answer to your question, Howard, what do I mean... it really is one of these reader response things. What you want is the readers to read this and not feel that it's cliche. That's what I want. Now define what it is... that's harder to do because everybody who's going to read is going to bring something different to it. What they've read before. For me, Eragon was terribly cliche. For the 13-year-old boy who's picking that up as their first fantasy novel, it was not cliche. So your audience will have an effect on what is cliche, what isn't. But there are certain standards of film, of storytelling, that have just been used so many times that... it's just... it's weak.
* Dan: The reason, I think, that a lot of characters seem cliche is because they are archetypes. They have to character elements or three. And when you compare that to another character that has the same three, he's gonna seem identical. If you make your characters as round as possible, give them as many different character elements as you can, make them full people, then you can't compare them point for point to any other character out there.
* Tracy: There's a theory of story called Dramatica that actually deals with character archetypes and making them into complex characters. The whole point of that is that a full set of characters -- and they list eight archetypes in their structure -- a full set of characters makes a complete argument. And if you're missing different perspectives from within that structure, then you're missing some part of a great argument. And so in that particular structure, what they want you to do is to shuffle elements around. You take one quality of one character and give it to a different character, and switch things and move things around. I've actually found that to be very effective as a model. You can't just put stuff on the dart board and start throwing darts and expect to come up with characters that you're going to like and work with, but at the same time, I think that it's an element that people can use in their writing to build a whole structures and get interesting characters.
* Brandon: Okay. As I think about what you just said and the question here, what comes to me to make a character non-cliched would be good motivations. In fact, unique and original motivations. You can throw in this archetype character, but if you can come up with reasons that they're doing what they're doing without making them the same old things... the villains are a good example. Villains always seem to want to destroy the world for no good reason. They're either insane or they don't give motivations. That's your cliched villain. The villain becomes less cliched not when... they still want to destroy the world, you can still have that. That can be the archetype. But when you add a motivation that makes sense, that makes rational sense, which is still a motivation you haven't seen before or you haven't seen explored before, you round the character.
* Tracy: My response to that was one, who's the president? and two, what do I have to do? And that's because the antagonists in my stories are always very strong. I try to... we try to make very strong antagonists because they have to drive things. They have to be there to provide motivation, and they also have to make sense. They absolutely must make sense. If you look at some of the best evil characters are those who are absolutely certain that they are right.
* Brandon: And when you are reading them, you almost feel that they are right, if you have viewpoints from that character.
* Tracy: Absolutely. You have to be convinced of their argument in order for any of it to make sense. Sometimes they can even be a problem for you. We have a character, Lord Soth, in our Dragonlance books and when we came up with him, he just exploded into the scene. He made such sense, he had such drama to him, and such power and romance to this character, that any time he walked onto the stage in the book he took everything over. And he'd grab the story by its throat and start dragging it off someplace. And Margaret Weis and I would have to say, "No, no, that's not where the story is supposed to go. Please let go of the story." We'd have to put him in a closet someplace and then we'd have to go on and to get the story back, and then he'd walk back in and he'd grab the story again and he'd drag it off someplace else.
* Brandon: One question, we were asking the audience things that they were curious about, that fits into this. I think that one tendency that people have a lot is when they are writing people of the opposite gender as themselves to push that character into more of a cliche than the characters who are the same gender as themselves. I've noticed this in my own early writing and in other people's writing. Tracy, how do you write characters that are female and make them... I was going to say well-rounded but that has...
* Tracy: Thanks. I think I might drop it. It's interesting because... very often, men when they write women tend to write those characters as though they were just men with breasts. They were just... not only that, but this is where we get chainmail bikinis from, is men writing about women. Chainmail bikinis make no sense whatsoever in any kind of martial arts sense. Nevertheless, here we have this archetype. Why? Because men are writing women the way men think women are supposed to be. And this is completely... this does no service to anybody. This perpetuates bad myths for men, for one. And it means that we have no understanding whatsoever about the female experience. And the female experience is a fantastic thing and a wonderful thing to explore in literature. But it's very difficult for men to do that. They... to be able to understand the feminine perspective, to get outside of our little male compartmentalized world and to understand how women perceive our existence is something that men have to work at.
* Brandon: Some of the same things that we've been talking about here... it's something to be aware of, when you're going to write someone of the other gender. You tend to immediately fall back on cliches. Men tend to fall back on the three female archetypes -- the damsel in distress, or the Amazon woman, or... there's a third one that I can't remember. Oh, the mother figure...
* Tracy: I'm going to go with crazy woman, because men write crazy women all the time, too. What I find is really helpful in that is to give what I write to my wife, because she will read that and she will say, "You know what, a woman would never say this. This is what a guy would have a woman say." And then it's much easier for me to get an understanding of that if I can get a female perspective on what's going on within the context of the story.
* Brandon: We've talked about this a little bit on the podcast before, but my philosophy on it, I'll just reiterate. Character first. If you're looking to just fill a role, your character is gonna feel flat, no matter what. If they're just in there to do one thing, then you're not going to have a well-rounded character. People have to be... people exist to do more than one thing. People... their lives are pulled this way and that, and they have complex motivations, and they are going to be motivated by a lot of different things, and they are going to have things that are important to them that are not as important to the other characters. So if you jump into another character viewpoint and their entire life focuses around the main character, then you're doing something wrong. Because that's going to make them feel like just an attachment to the main character.

# Season 2 Episode 24 Dan Coughed?

* Tracy Hickman: It's true. Everybody thinks for those of us who write that it's an easy thing and it's not, it's a job, it's work. It's wonderful -- I tell you right now, it's really wonderful when you get to the end of the book and you've got those 750-800 manuscript brick of pages and you've written The End and it's such a glorious moment to know that you've achieved this incredible piece of work that's one unified whole, structural, solid, fabulous characters, delivers a tremendous message. And then the next morning, it's page one, and you know that there's gonna have to be 800 more of these, and it's like looking at the mountain from the bottom. And that's hard, getting into a new book is hard. It is hard work, it is work every day. And it's hard keeping up with structure, making sure everything is solid. It's not all smoking jackets and collie dogs, it's...
* Brandon: Well, and there's always the... I've done this other thing before, I'm starting something new. Am I just gonna completely flub it? I knew that I got the other one right by the end. Do you have that?
* Tracy: Everybody does. Every writer has this. Every writer is either one either they feel like they've only got one book in them or they feel like they've already written the best thing and that nothing could ever be as gloriously great as that Winnie the Pooh adventure...
* Tracy: But it's true though, that writers basically believe they are never going to be or they are already has-beens. And the thing we try to convince writers of all time, I tell writers all the time and I must remind myself is that we have not yet written our best work. That the best is yet to come. And then it could be that next book. It could be two books away. But it's in our future because every time we write, we improve our craft. Every time we put word to page, we improve our craft. And the fact of the matter is that the first books that you write are not going to be good. They just aren't. Sorry. They just aren't. The first book I wrote was in fourth grade. I'm going to tell everybody about this tomorrow, but the first book I wrote was in fourth grade. I decided that the way you wrote a book is that you just kept writing a little bit more every day and when you had enough pages, you had a book. So I wrote this book about a destroyer that went to the South Pacific, was attacked by 50 planes, and sank -- on page 2. I had writer's block in fourth grade. I didn't know what to do with this. The boat sank. The boat was the main character, man. I tried to fix it. We're talking writing on that big chunky paper with the big thick lines and the dotted line in the middle so that you didn't go too far with the little letters. I couldn't do it. I've still got this story, by the way. The point is that your first stuff is not ever going to be as good as the second thing you do, and the second is not going to be as good as the third thing you do. You just have to accept the idea that you're going to make rag shoes to begin with and then the next thing is going to be better. You just have to keep going.
* Brandon: What's your publication story? You've got a little bit of a different one than a lot of people, but... Aspiring writers always want to know how'd you break in.
* Tracy: Of course they do. Aspiring writers want you to provide them the silver bullet, that golden key, that one piece of knowledge that they harbor inside themselves. That all successful knowledge... we have club -- successful knowledge club -- successful writers club, and we all harbor this secret that we don't tell anybody.
* Tracy: Because then it's out there and everyone is going to be a successful writer. There is no key. There is no secret. There is no magic bullet. Everybody has to pay their dues. It takes 10 years to become an overnight success. That's 10 years of rejection letters, that's 10 years of writing articles maybe, that's 10 years of writing for somebody else, that's 10 years of writing for yourself or... it's always different. The path to becoming a writer is always different. In my case, I was in Logan Utah. I was out of work. In the late 70s, early 80s. I was on church welfare. I applied for a bus driving job at the university up there and came in second out of 500 applicants. Hah. They don't give you anything for second by the way. Could not get work. My wife and I had self-published a couple of Dungeons & Dragons adventures, which as it turns out may have been questionable in terms of their legality. Nevertheless, we had heard that they would pay $500 for one of these adventures if they liked it. This particular winter, I couldn't take my children to church because I couldn't afford shoes for them. And so in an effort to buy shoes for the kids, I sent the adventures to TSR hoping that they would buy them. They offered me a job. And so I valiantly became the first member in my family in many generations to cross the plains the wrong way. Went back east to Wisconsin, took up this job, sat down, and my... bless his heart, Al Hammock, our editor at the time, sat me down and said, "You have great adventures and you have wonderful typing skills, but you can't write." And he taught me how to write, and paid me while...
* Brandon: What did he have to tell you? What were the things that you had to learn?
* Tracy: He pointed out... what he did is, he handed me back my project and he had me diagram. Yes. Every sentence. What I soon discovered from this horrible exercise was that every sentence that I started with, started with a preposition, and that every sentence was written in passive voice. Sominex did not do as good a job on people as my text. You could read my text and be asleep within three or four sentences. He taught me active voice. He taught me variance in structure. He taught me structure within the body of paragraphs, he taught me structure within the body of chapters. And I learned the craft of writing and structure there as I was putting my adventures together. The first adventures I did there. But anyway, that's pretty much how I got started. I learned the craft of writing at TSR doing adventure modules there. Met Margaret Weis there. We go by Weis and Hickman because she was the one who is going to be the writer. And I was going to be a game designer for the rest of my life and retire on the TSR pension fund. Not only is there no pension fund, there is no TSR. That's how I became a writer. But that was the way in. Everybody has a different way in.

# Season 2 Episode 25 The Seven Deadly Sins of Slush Stories

* The seven deadly sins are:
  1. Infodumping (a.k.a. a story is not a lecture)
  2. Staff Meetings (a.k.a. infodumping in dialogue is still infodumping)
  3. Incomprehensible actions (a.ka. lack of setup)
  4. Navel contemplation (a.ka. non sequitur infodumping and no action)
  5. White room syndrome (a.k.a. lack of setting)
  6. Dystopias (a.ka. the all-disgusting background)
  7. Dark and gritty (a.ka. all the disgusting little details)
* Recommended: Revise, revise, revise. And write your passion.
* Nancy Fulda: It was really surprising to me when I started working for Baen how extremely common this approach is cause everybody knows, don't info dump, everybody knows infodumping is not a good idea. So they just say I'll just have people talking. If it's dialogue, it's not infodumping. It's not true.
* Nancy: Three. Incomprehensible action. Everybody hears, all the time, start your story in the middle of the action, start where something interesting is happening. People take this advice, they try their very best, and I end up with a gunfight and a shootout and I don't even know which guy is the good guy and which guy is the bad guy. Bullets flying.
* Howard: You say good guy and bad guy. That's so relative these days. You don't know which character you're supposed to care about.
* Brandon: And I think we've talked about this in a podcast. Action is very difficult to pull off unless you have rooting interest for someone in a book. I always say start with motion. It doesn't have to be an action scene.
* Nancy: Some of the best advice I've heard is you start the story where something changes. Not in the middle of a gunfight because that's the climax, really, right? And if you start there, aside from the fact that I don't know what's going on, there's also not very many places you can build to, to make the story more exciting. It's an intro, it's a hook, it's not a climax.
* Brandon: This is going to be harder though, also, with short stories which you are reading because you don't have a chapter to establish character. It's one of the things that I've always found harder with short stories, is getting that hook to start in the right place because you don't have a lot of lead time, but if you go too far, then it's confusing.
* Nancy: Hooks are really tricky. Because I've seen them all, I've seen all the versions. And they're really hard to get right. If you hook too hard, your hook is so interesting that the rest of the story is a complete letdown. So you actually have to be careful about that too.
* Nancy: Number four. We call it navel contemplation. I don't know if that's familiar to you guys or not. We got this one story once, and I was... I was almost bored to tears. Because the entire world was about to be destroyed and the main character was sitting at a cafe wondering about the meaning of life and then she was sitting at the cafe wondering whether anything would change after today. See, I can see you guys are already bored to tears and all I've done is summarize. People will ask why this is not an infodump... You're going to want to ask what is the difference between navel contemplation and infodumping, and the difference is, navel contemplation is completely irrelevant. You could cut it all out and the story would still make sense. Infodumping is at least somewhat useful in some vague sense.
* Nancy: Number five. White Room Syndrome. That ought to be a familiar phrase. Talking heads...
* Brandon: People walk in, don't give any setting, it's like they are talking in a white room.
* Nancy: Number six. Dystopias. This is somewhat of a personal one, cause I know lots of people like them. But I am dead sick of seeing books being regulated, love being forbidden, children raised by machines, everyone gets a disfiguring disease when they are 13, whatever you can do to make the world be fundamentally wrong -- I have probably seen it before, and I don't really want to see it again. Again, that's very editor specific and this comes back to the concept of every editor has their own thing.
* Nancy: All right. And the seventh of the seven deadly sins of slush stories -- again, this one's a bit personal -- it's dark-and-gritty. Some people would call this realistic, I call it dark-and-gritty. Prison scenes, torture, drugs... everything very depressing. Those stories don't work at all for me or for anyone else on the Baen.
* Nancy: One thing I should clarify. None of these things are mortal wounds. If a story excels in other areas and it's necessary for some reason, of course, you can get past me with any one of these. But by and large, if I see that on the first page of the story, it's not gonna get past.
* Nancy: Yeah. Okay. The first thing you have got to do -- you hear it all the time -- is revise, revise, revise. And I feel that people have three major areas of a story where they make mistakes when they are revising. And that's the beginning, the middle, and the end.
* Nancy: So, the other thing I really have to say to authors, especially beginning authors. You hear a lot of don'ts, you hear a lot of don't do this, don't do that, here's all the rules. When you're just getting started as an author and you're just sort of feeling your way into the field, I really say you should follow your passions. Write the story that you love, write the story you adore, and ignore the fact that it happens to be dystopic or it happens to start with a staff meeting or whatever and write that story the best you can, because that's your best bet.
* Brandon: Yes. I'm going to go and write my dystopian egg gunfighter torture story.
* Nancy: If the egg is what you are passionate about, write the egg. Really. The stories that get through are the ones where I feel the author caring about it. Now there are a lot of stories the author cares about that don't get through, but if you don't care, it really doesn't have a chance.

# Season 2 Episode 26 How Publishing is Changing in the New Century

* Brandon: How is this changing... why is this happening and how is this changing the short fiction market?
* Nancy: Well, any time a new opportunity arises for making money, people will expand themselves to fill it. So what we have... the Internet has come. The Internet is there, and there is opportunity for electronic distribution of material, and so...
* Brandon: I will note that Tor.com, Tor's website, has started doing the Sci Fiction thing, publishing short stories for free as publicity, which makes a lot more sense for them since the people who are going to be reading their stories are likely to go and read their books. It's a much better match. One of the things I've noticed, and you mentioned this in the previous podcast, the electronic magazines tend to pay a lot better to the authors, because they don't have as much overhead, I assume?
* Nancy: Yes, less to print. Also, one of the big motivations behind Baen's Universe's pay scale is the fact that novelists don't like to write short fiction, so all of the best authors are out there writing novels and not writing short fiction. So the principle at Baen's Universe is that we will pay the authors of the commissioned stories a lot, up to $.25 per word, in order to lure them back into the short fiction market.
* Brandon: And one thing is that length is not going to matter. Except for the price you're paying, length does not matter. Where in a short story magazine, if they buy a 17,000 word short story, that's half of their space for the magazine. And so they aren't going to do that very often. But if you write a really killer novella at 17,000 words and send it out to one of these electronic magazines, they could say, "You know what, this is a great story. We don't have to..."
* Nancy: The space is not actually as big a benefit as people think because what we've been finding is that after a certain point if you pack it bigger, people aren't any more satisfied. In fact, sometimes they're dissatisfied. I think it was the movie Henry The Fifth when it came out and it was four hours long. People did not like to go see it and they did not go to see it twice. The same thing happens with online fiction, the eye fatigues a lot more with screen reading.
* Brandon: What's the future of this? Do you see the explosion of things like e-readers and the iPhones -- a lot of people talked about the iPhone for reading and things like this -- do you see this generating a lot more interest in online magazines? Do you think this is the wave of the future or do you think it's a very distant wave that still hasn't hit us yet?
* Nancy: I'd say it hasn't hit yet and the reason is because every time a new electronic reader comes out, for example the Kindle, all of the online discussion forums for writers go into a... I don't know, a supernova. Everybody's talking about it, everybody's worried about the death of fiction. When I talk to my friends who aren't writers, half of them haven't heard what it is, and those who have, have no interest at all in an electronic reader. And I know this is a very controversial issue, but there are a lot of people who would say exactly the opposite, but I don't see it coming yet.
* Brandon: I actually agree with you. I see it coming, but very far. I don't think this generation's ever going to transition. I don't think the next generation may even transition to electronic readers, but I think there will be a point where we do transition. I think the short stories will be a great transitioning point because you don't necessarily feel that you need to have that physical copy, just like you feel sometimes with a book you need to have the physical copy. But I don't think it's going to change as quickly as for instance the music revolution with the iPod and things like that.
* Nancy: This brings up a very, very important point about digital media, especially when it comes to archival and information storage. Because it's happened so many times, how a times have you had something on a 3 1/4 inch floppy, and then after the media revolution, you find out there's not a machine in the building, on the campus, anywhere within a 10 mile radius that can read that sucker. That's the problem. The beauty of the book is the same beauty that there was with the scroll. It's there. And it doesn't go away even if you change readers.
* Brandon: Let's get off of this topic. Let's talk about the next topic. You mentioned Anthology Builder. I want to talk about this cause this is the other big change that's happening, which is print-on-demand. In fact there are a lot of discourses of whether electronic readers will take off or whether print-on-demand is the wave of the future. Tell us about print-on-demand and tell us about Anthology Builder.
* Nancy: Print-on-Demand. The first thing you've got to do is separate print-on-demand in your head from self-publishing. The two have become very synonymous, but they're two significantly different things. Print-on-demand means the publisher doesn't have a storehouse full of books. What it means is they have the book electronically stored, and when an order comes in, they send it to their printing machine, it prints the book, it puts on a cover, it completes a finished book. Some of them do it as fast as five minutes. Self-publishing means nobody in this world would take you and so you decided to pay money to get it done yourself.
* Howard: There are successful self publishers. But I don't do POD. I don't do print-on-demand. When I publish, I function a lot like a regular publishing house. I buy 5,000 books in China and I have a set street date and I make pretty good money at it.
* Nancy: Well, and to self-publishing in general, in fact. Because when we think of self-publishing, at least most people, what they think of is these things you seen that have 10 million grammar errors and things like that and as Howard demonstrates, that's not really necessary to self-publishing.
* Brandon: Anthology Builder? What are you guys doing? What is the pitch on Anthology Builder?
* Nancy: Anthology Builder. What we have got, we've got a database of really great stories. We know they are great because we don't let them in unless they've been previously published in a paying market or if they've been written by a really good author. And so what we do, we have this database. And what you do is, you come to the site, you pick the stories that interest you most, you pick a cover art, you write an introduction if you want, and we printed and we send it to you. And it's a hefty book, you can...
* Howard: How much does it cost?
* Nancy: 15 bucks plus shipping. Shipping seems to go up twice per year, right now, so order soon.
* Brandon: How much is the author getting on anthology?
* Nancy: The authors are splitting a pro rata of $1.50 per order.
* Brandon: Okay. So about 10%. Split 10% based on word count, I assume?
* Howard: Which is about what you're gonna be getting...
* Brandon: For a paperback? That's a good royalty. That's a standard royalty for a trade paperback.
* Brandon: Okay. How is POD changing the publishing industry?
* Howard: Here's the big thing. When I buy books in bulk, when I buy books, when a traditional publisher prints... or a traditional printer prints books, the price of the book is around 5% of the final retail price. A POD publisher, the price that they are paying for the book is gonna be closer to 40% of the cover price. The POD printer... the people who own that equipment are then going to try and mark that up at least 25 or 30%. So by the time Nancy sells the $15 book... Nancy, if you guys were able to print 10,000 of those, you'd be paying...
* Nancy: Less.
* Howard: You'd be paying $.60 each for them, and you'd be able to sell them for six or seven bucks.
* Brandon: But is POD getting cheaper?
* Howard: Yes. It is getting cheaper, it is getting faster. In fact, it's trending in such a way that POD looks like it may be a technology that disrupts the entire printing industry in the next 20 years.
* Brandon: A lot of us are hoping... I'm hoping... I'm one of those that's actually looking at this and saying, "Wow, it would be awesome if you could walk into a bookstore and they had a POD kiosk where you could type out... say, oh, let's get that Brandon Sanderson book that he published 20 years ago that's not in print because there may be 10 or 15 people who want a copy a year and it pops it out."
* Howard: POD solves the problem of out-of-print. And that's really why I think Anthology Builder is so cool, is that you've got stories that were published in Asimov's or whatever way back when... you can't get your hands on that anymore. Except through Anthology Builder.
* Brandon: You could build an anthology of one author's work if you had enough stories.
* Nancy: Yeah, you could do that. You can research markets if you want to submit to them. Get four Asimov's, four Analog stories, four Strange Horizons.
* Brandon: Cause I want to talk about Howard's model, the giving it away for free one.
* Howard: Okay. I'm going to go back to Kevin Kelly and the superconducting copy machine. He identified eight different ways in which things that can be copied for free are still worth paying for. And the three that apply to me are like customization, where I've got a book and I will do a sketch just for you in the book. And yes, the content of the book you've already read, but I have now customized it for you. The second is patronage and that's where a portion of my readers -- I think it's around 5% -- want to support me. They realize they're getting something for free, they want to send me money. Patronage is really important. And the third is convenience. Which is, sure, you can read it online, but that takes time. You've got to be sitting at your computer. With the books...
* Brandon: I love having the web comic books. I buy them, I love reading because you can turn the page rather than clicking and that makes so much difference.
* Brandon: But this is a viable... I mean, you make an income?
* Howard: Absolutely viable.
* Brandon: Is it viable for fiction, I wonder? I always think about this.
* Howard: I haven't seen that yet. And I think Anthology Builder is the place where that's going to get proven.
* Brandon: But they're not giving it away for free.
* Howard: No, they're not.
* Brandon: Is this venue... giving away fiction for free, could you make enough off of patronage, advertising, or selling merchandise with fiction?
* Nancy: Eric Flint would say you can, because he says after he put 1632 in the Baen Free Library, his sales went up, significantly.
* Brandon: I gave Warbreaker away for free. I've given away a book for free.
* Howard: And you know what, I think there, the generative -- that's a Kevin Kelly term that means something that allows you to make money on something that is easily copyable -- the generative there is convenience. You start reading the book online and you realize wow, this is fantastic. I'm bookmarking this page. I'm... by the time...
* Brandon: Or you read the next one when it comes out in hardcopy and it's not yet online.

# Season 2 Episode 27 Reading Critically

* Brandon: We are going to talk today about reading as a writer. It's kind of an interesting different topic for us, but I've noticed that as I've become a writer, the way I look at writing that I read has changed dramatically. Dan, has it changed for you, and how?
* Dan: It has. First of all, reading for me changed drastically when I became an English major and started taking editing classes, because then I started noticing all of the grammatical and punctuation and spelling problems much more than I ever did before. Now that I'm a professional storyteller, I start noticing all of those elements more than I did before. I pick up on things. "Oh, this is how he did that. That was very clever the way he introduced this thing and then paid it off later." Or, on the other hand, this was very not clever, the way he totally screwed this up.
* Brandon: Howard, how about you?
* Howard: Absolutely. What Dan's described has happened to me. I also noticed sloppy prose where adjectives...
* Brandon: Purple prose?
* Howard: Purple prose is another category altogether. But just sloppy prose where the same adjective gets used over and over. I was reading the Hordes Metamorphosis game book and one of the character descriptions... it described his character as now having an unprecedented connection to dire trolls which gave him unprecedented power over his enemies. And I realized, you just used that same adjective in two... and you weren't being silly when you did it. It's a very sloppy mistake.
* Dan: Character description is one that I see a lot. There's a series that I won't name where the guy describes almost every woman in that series the same way. And I can tell, every time, it's so obvious. And that just really starts to get to me.
* Brandon: I've noticed that when I became a writer there was a period where I didn't like reading as much. For me, it was very hard to read. I didn't like reading much -- that's the wrong way to phrase it. Every time I sat down to read, I would notice the mistakes so much it would make me so anxious to go work on my own books and not have those mistakes that I was never able to finish anything. This stretched for a period of a number of years where all these things were happening to me. I was noticing flaws and errors or I was noticing how good something was or I was... it just made me anxious to go write and I actually read much less. I think this was a problem because I think that it's good to keep up on what's happening, what people are doing that is very good and I'm wondering how authors...
* Howard: I'm going to argue about that. Brandon, it wasn't a problem because what you are doing is... that was a discovery process for you where you were finding things in published prose, in published fiction, that you didn't like and that was exciting you about sitting down and practicing your own writing and making sure it didn't happen. You went through that phase, you became a better writer as a result, and now you read a lot more, right?
* Brandon: Yes, I do. I read quite a bit.
* Dan: I think that's a very common thing. I'm going to bet that a ton of our listeners have this same thing, because I think it's just an aspect of being a creative person. You cannot read or experience something without thinking, "How could I do that? How could I do it better? How could I make it my own?"
* Brandon: Or pointing out to your friends, "Oh, they did this, they did that." It can destroy the experience for people. My father just loves to go and experience a movie. It really bothers him if you sit there and pick apart what's happening. One thing you mentioned that I think is really poignant. I was seeing all these things in published writing that people were doing that I didn't agree with. I think that's a process writers go through when they realize I can do this. There's that moment that it opens up and becomes not something that people on a pedestal do but that you can do. I think that issue alone knocks the pedestal out a little bit.
* Dan: I think one of the ways to do that is... we get this a lot with Stephenie Meyer. A lot of people will complain about how she... they don't like her books or whatever, but they're very popular. I think the thing you do as a writer is you look at that and say even if I don't personally like it, it's obviously very successful. That means there's something good about it. I need to find out what that is. Then you can learn that lesson. You can learn a lesson like that from any successful book.
* Brandon: What we have to separate out here, is we have to exploit between looking at something and saying what can I learn from this and looking at it and saying I want to emulate this. Because that's a very big difference. I would say that for me, when I'm reading, picking out an element... saying this author is really good at this specific thing is what I'm looking to do nowadays. I read a lot and I enjoy what I read. I can't read terrible books anymore. I just can't. There used to be a time where I could read a book and even if I wasn't enjoying it that much, I could finish it because I wanted to find out what was happening. Now, if I don't enjoy a book, I put it down. In fact, in the last couple of months, I've put down more books by chapter three or four than I've finished. Because I say I don't have time for this. But in those books that I finish, not all of them are perfect, in fact many of them aren't. But there are often things that the author is doing specifically... this author is good at this... or sometimes what really helps me is when the author almost gets it because then I can say, "Wow, if this had worked... if I can figure out how to make this work, then I can do this." It comes in that issue of when are you plagiarizing and when are you learning from someone? Authors steal all the time. We steal in the right way. We learn from someone or we learn a plot archetype and we make it our own. What is the difference there between just plagiarizing them or just mimicking them and doing it your way?
* Howard: Plagiarizing is where you take somebody's metaphor... use Douglas Adams' "they hovered in the air much in the way that bricks don't." If you use that metaphor in your own book, that's plagiarism. I see what you're saying, but if you look at that and say, "Wow, this is a metaphor that works well because it conjures up an impossible image. I want to conjure an impossible image, what can I do to describe this? The magic water flowed downhill like concrete over pancakes..." Something. I don't know. That makes you laugh. But you're doing the same sort of thing by looking at what that author did, exploring the technique, and trying to apply it to your own work. That's not plagiarism, that's learning from somebody else.
* Brandon: Or taking a plot archetype. Saying, "I love heist stories. Heist stories are fun. Let's look at what the successful pieces of a heist story are, and let's use the pieces that I like and not use the ones I don't like."
* Brandon: How can we do this? How can our listeners better read critically and learn from what they're reading? Any tips for them?
* Howard: Reading and trying to identify archetypes or identify structure...
* Brandon: Breaking it into smaller pieces. Break it down. That's an excellent point.
* Dan: Deconstruct it as you read.
* Howard: Reading it and trying to determine when was the change between act one and act two. When did we introduce the turning point for this character? Or if you have a strong emotional reaction to something in a book, going back and rereading that passage and trying to figure out why it happened.
* Brandon: Why? What happened? Finding out which things... when you're reading a book, if a certain element just makes you go, "Whoa!" That also helps identify who you are as a writer. If you're writing scenes like that, you're probably going to be more passionate about it and you probably can do a good job of it because there are times in books that are going to affect you differently from other people. One thing I'd also say is look for what works and what doesn't. Try and figure out why. What works and what doesn't.
* Dan: Another suggestion I'm going to make is specifically look at something that you don't like or don't think you're going to like, and yet is successful, such as Harry Potter or Twilight. Figure out why. Force yourself to actually find all the good parts that you don't think are there, because then you are going to learn a lot more.
* Brandon: Exactly. That's a perfect example. The other thing that I think people need to be aware of is understanding what things you personally don't like rather than calling them flaws of the book if that makes sense. Sometimes you just don't like a genre. You are not going to like a teen girl vampire romance no matter how well it is written.

# Season 2 Episode 28 Watchmen

* Consider critical reading. Start by looking at plot, setting, and character -- how does the work do at each of these? What did it do well, and how did it do that? Where does it have an emotional or intellectual impact, and why? How can I use that?

# Season 2 Episode 29 How Not to End Your Book

* Brandon: Let's give some context for this podcast. I was teaching my class a little while ago and someone actually asked me this question. They said, "How do I not end my book?" I was like...ah, um... Now I want to take another stab at it and try and talk it through. Endings are one of the things I get the most questions about. Let's tackle this. What are bad endings? Bad habits we fall into for endings? Dan?
* Dan: Not going far enough. If you've got a compelling idea and you don't take it as far as the reader wants you to, then you have failed. Ideally, you need to take it even farther.
* Brandon: Let's talk about that. What do you mean? Define that better?
* Howard: That flies in the face of "leave them wanting more?"
* Dan: I think you can leave them wanting more...
* Brandon: By expanding their expectations?
* Dan: You take an idea... the one that leaps immediately to mind because I watched an episode today is the TV show Dollhouse right now. Which got off to a very slow start. It is getting better with each episode. They are taking their core concept of memory wiping and rebuilding much further than I initially thought they were going to go. That is opening up a lot of different avenues of storytelling that I was not expecting.
* Brandon: So you want them to get done with the book and say, "Wow, what now?"
* Dan: And to leave possibilities... leave a lot of avenues open where you take an idea and you just take it as far as you can and everyone says, "Wow, that's fantastic. I can't wait to read what he does with these other seven ideas that were..."
* Brandon: Let's talk about that. One of the things that I bring up on this point often is that you want to fulfill on the promises you make in the first part of the book. In other words, if you are building a plot centered around one thing... let's say, you're building a plot centered around these two characters and their connection. Then the climactic ending is going to need to deal with that in some way, fulfilling promises. This sounds obvious, but people make this mistake all the time.
* Howard: I think they make the mistake because they don't realize that they are making that promise. That's hard. When I sat down with Dan Willis and Bob Defendi and had them help me outline the end of Longshoreman of the Apocalypse, I had them help me outline Act III and come up with a good ending. They identified a half a dozen promises that I had made to the reader that I didn't know I was making. That's critical. So I think one of the best ways to avoid a bad ending is to have somebody help you with that. Don't let them write the end of your book. Don't tell them how to fulfill those promises.
* Brandon: A lot of trouble with endings. Looking at her current story that she had just finished, one of the big problems was, she had set up a mystery. She had set up a whodunit. Someone was killed in one of the early chapters and all of the other characters started working on who did it. But she wasn't writing a mystery -- at least, she didn't think she was. Yet right there, chapter 4, I'm promised we're going to find out who killed this person. In that case, what she's doing is, she's setting up, "Oh, try and outthink me." The promise is I'm going to surprise you with an interesting resolution to who killed who. So when she got to the end and they had been right all along... they decided on someone pretty early and then worked on it and found out, lo and behold, it was them and chased them down and got them, there was a feeling that something was unfulfilled here. It was because it was... they had made a promise but... she thought, "Oh, my promise is that the bad guy will get caught." That's not actually what the promise of a mystery plot is. The promise of a mystery plot is I am going to surprise you with an interesting mystery... One of the problems also is, she's very good with character. She was setting up this interesting character interaction, and she was able to pull that promise off very well. Characters had a very fulfilling ending, and yet it felt overshadowed by this other thing. For her, it's a re-balancing. It's a... indicate to the readers this is a character drama and not a mystery.
* Dan: Another place where you can see this happening all the time is with the big action set piece. Where somebody says I want to end... if it's a fantasy book, they want it to end with a great big battle or a sword fight. If it's science fiction, they want a space battle. If it's modern, then they want a car chase or they want a gunfight. That's a very fun, climactic way to end a book, but character normally gets lost when you do that unless you're very careful.
* Howard: It's a fun, climactic way to end a movie because it's visually quite a treat. It's hard to end a book that way.
* Brandon: It bugs me in movies too. I call this the third act Hollywood wimpout. I can point to several distinct examples, I Am Legend by Will Smith being one recently. Where you have two very interesting setup acts, where you are dealing with character psychological issues and with the scientific plot or this interesting mystery plot, which third act becomes now we're in a Hollywood action movie. We have... it feels like... they feel they have to end with a big action set piece. If your plot was we're going to build cars, I would expect Act III to be that. If your first two acts are a psychological character drama, I don't want my Act III to be... I call it the wimpout because it's safe. You'll see Hollywood do it a lot because pulling off a really dramatic interesting ending that's going to be crowd friendly when you're dealing with these sorts of character things and stuff like that, is difficult.
* Dan: It is. One example that I would give of when they have done this correctly is the movie Grosse Pointe Blank. Which I thought ended with a gunfight, but throughout the entire gunfight, they were also paying off all of this character stuff that they had been building up. I thought they did a really good job of intertwining those two different aspects.
* Brandon: Let's go a different direction with this. Actually, kind of a direction we've talked a little bit about before, but... Do you need to resolve everything in an ending?
* Howard: Not if you want to write another book.
* Brandon: How do you do that then, by paying off your promises, and yet leaving room open for another book? Because I think this is a big problem. People end books poorly this way all the time.
* Howard: I think the easiest way to do it is to start hinting at promises to the reader in Act II and Act III with the understanding that, "Wow, this was introduced kind of late, we're not going to get to finish that, are we?" I think readers understand that.
* Brandon: That's one very good way.
* Dan: The mystery idea that you brought up earlier... mysteries and thrillers and crime novels, you can... you just have to be careful about how you set your promise, because if the promise is we are boring to solve this mystery by the end of the book, that's fine. But that doesn't necessarily mean that all of the main character's personal problems are going to be solved or that this mystery won't be part of a much larger mystery or a much larger conspiracy.
* Brandon: That's the one that would be... my biggest piece of advice if you are trying to write a series is you promise something happening and you give them... you fulfill on that promise in ways that exceed their expectations, but that fulfillment opens up a whole lot more. You say, "Wow, this creates an even bigger problem or this... I didn't realize was bigger... was part of a larger problem." I like to do this in my series. This is what I tried to do in the Mistborn books. I wanted to do something in the first book that involved the overthrow of an empire. I wanted to do that in one book rather than a whole series. I made a promise, I fulfilled it, and my goal is at the end for you to say, "Wow. This is a big problem now that they've done what they said they were going to do."
* Howard: I'm just reading now for the first time... well, having read to me courtesy of audio books, the Wheel of Time saga. The first book... I know that this series is long, it's really long... So listening to the first book, I remember thinking okay, there are promises that are going to be made here that are absolutely not going to be fulfilled for seven or eight books and I'm just ready to be bored. That is absolutely not what happened in that first book. That first book, I was promised a classic quest story. They set that up outside the tavern. Understand, back then, it wasn't a trope. Nowadays I look at it and think, "Oh, it's a trope." I still like it. It worked wonderfully. The promise of the rebirth of the dragon, the promise of the hero beating the Dark Lord, and I thought there is no way they can do all that in this book because the series is 12 books long. That's my inner...
* Brandon: 14 [cough]
* Howard: 14 books long. Right. Sorry. But I get to the end of that book, and I thought that was really brilliantly done. The promises that weren't fulfilled were promises that were introduced late in the book. Rand coming to grips with the fact that he is the dragon. The reader knows... yeah, he has got to be it. But the character hasn't come to grips with that, so it left something for subsequent books to work on.
* Brandon: This can't be emphasized enough, I think. If you end up with a terrible ending, it's generally going to be because of things that started going wrong much earlier. Maybe you'll run into a terrible ending because you're a multi-drafter, you're a discovery writer, you don't know where you're going and you get to the ending and then you write, "And then they all died." Then you set out and you plot what you actually want to happen. That may be the way for you to do it.
* Howard: In order to not write a bad ending, sometimes you have to write a bad ending, and then rewrite another bad ending, and then rewrite yet a third bad ending, and then sit down with somebody and ask, "What am I doing wrong?" And they will help you identify, "Well, there's this promise right here that you keep not fulfilling," or you keep killing everybody off because you got bored. Whatever. I think you have to write some bad endings before you write the one that you want to keep.
* Brandon: My early bad endings happened because of foreshadowing laziness -- laziness in foreshadowing -- meaning the ending itself would've been great, if it would have had all of the things it needed to back it up. Which meant that if I would have spent a little bit more time... even some of my published books I still feel have a part of this issue at the ending. If I would have spent a little bit more time setting the stage, putting the pieces into the book...
* Dan: Both of these examples that we have brought up, it's interesting to point out. Brandon used to hate rewriting, he has since learned that that is an important part of writing.
* Howard: Now he loves it. He adores it.
* Dan: I used to be horrible at endings. After writing terrible endings and rewriting them about 100 times, I think I'm fairly good at them now because it's something I had to force myself to work on.

# Season 2 Episode 30 Things We’ve Learned in the Last Year, Howard

* Brandon: I asked you what made you come to this realization. I don't know that I got a satisfactory answer for me. How did you realize this? How did you come to understand the difference in your writing, in your goals?
* Howard: It was not... I don't need to tell you what it wasn't, I need to tell you what it was. Honestly, it was recording these podcasts with you bozos. Because I end up being forced to think analytically about something I do reflexively. Sitting down and analyzing what you do reflexively is how you improve. It's the principle of focused practice versus just work. I was just working. I was grinding away, doing what I always do. Thinking about this in the context of trying to podcast about being a good writer forced me to start analyzing what I was writing. I started looking at punchlines and thinking, "Well, what kind of a punchline is this?" Then I started looking at the structures. Now understand, this didn't change what I had been doing, it forced me to look at what I'd been doing and see what was working. When I sit down and write a week of scripts, and that week focuses on a given theme. Sometimes that theme is situational, but situations run dry real fast. You can get one or two punchlines out of them and then whoop, we're done. When I really milk something for a week, it's because I've set up a satirical sort of environment where I can look at something... I can look at it in a couple of different angles, at a couple of different angles or from a couple of different angles, and I can explore them and tell jokes on all of them. When I made that discovery, the structuring of my stories got easier, because I was able to take the big building blocks -- Act I, Act II, Act III -- the medium-sized building blocks of character discovers this, character discovers that, and then there's the giant building blocks of the individual characters who are larger of course then even individual books because of the form I'm working within. I was able to take those building blocks and refine it all the way down to saying, "Okay, and for this week, the gaps between those blocks are going to be filled in with commentary on socialized medicine or commentary on military discipline..."
* Brandon: Taking this and kind of pointing it at our general listener -- this is a theme we've talked about before, the idea of understanding what you're doing and understanding your own goals is very important. It's not something you can really pick out when you're first writing. The first time you sit down to write, you have to try different things and work on it.
* Howard: It's like Dan said when he was botching the ending. I assume that's what the vampire bunnies' book? Yeah, and when he sat down and realized, "Oh, I'm writing a farce."
* Brandon: I'm doing this... understanding what you're doing... Understanding what you're trying to do. Analyzing this way can actually break things at first. I've heard from people that getting too analytical about their writing early on can actually make it harder...
* Dan: And it scares people, too. Especially with humor. There's a lot of people listening to this right now who are saying if you overanalyze humor, then it's not funny anymore. Those people have never been professionally funny. There are few artists that agonize over their work more than standup comedians.
* Brandon: This is mostly, I think, advice for our experienced, yet still working to get published, or maybe are published and still working on the craft listeners, but if you're just starting off, remember, just start writing. There is a point where you're going to have to do this.

# Season 2 Episode 31 The Most Important Thing Brandon Learned in the Last Year

* Brandon: Oh, about writing? Gimmicks cannot compensate for bad writing. Nothing can really compensate for bad writing. I've learned this through several different experiences reading books that I really enjoyed, watching movies that I really enjoyed, and comparing them to other books and movies that I haven't quite enjoyed as much. Or I watched and I liked but don't hold up to re-watching.
* Howard: Okay. So what's a gimmick?
* Brandon: A gimmick is a twist ending, what I would count as a gimmick. Or a really keen pitch. The pitch that you can boil down... the Hollywood pitch, this is... Mistborn had a really great pitch. I really liked my pitch on Mistborn. This is, "What if the hero lost." I thought, "Wow, this is great. I've got this awesome pitch." When I pitch it to people, people are like, "Wow, that's a pretty cool take on the fantasy genre." I've been looking at my other books and saying, "Wow, I need a pitch like that. I need to be able to in one sentence say something that people say well." Then I stopped and started analyzing and saying, "Well, what's the pitch to George R.R. Martin's books?" The Song of Fire and Ice -- if you haven't read these books, they... his writing is genius, brilliant. One of the best pure, just writing wise, fantasy works out there. And the pitch, it's really, "Ah, a fantasy book like you've read lots of before." He doesn't have a huge fantastic pitch. There is no twist on the fantasy genre. There's no brilliant magic system that makes your mind bend when you read it in the beginning.
* Howard: Let's be clear on something really quick. Having a good pitch for Mistborn allowed good writing.
* Brandon: It's a good thing. All of these things are good things. Having a gimmick is always good... having a twist ending. A gimmick... the guy, Chris Paolini, 17-year-old publishing a book... that's a gimmick.
* Howard: That is a gimmick.
* Brandon: It's a brilliant one. It sells lots of books. But if the writing itself is not fantastic, then the gimmick... it may sell you some books, but it's not going to get you the long-lasting sort of literary power that I want to be able to bring about in my books. I don't think I'm there yet, but George R.R. Martin, to go back to that, he is there. It's sheer brilliant writing, that's the pitch.
* Brandon: You'll find all kinds of books that are released have one great really cool interesting idea where the writing isn't genius. That comes, it splashes, you say, "Wow, that was interesting" and then you forget it. A good example of this is... no, maybe it's not a great example, but we talked about the Dark Knight, the Batman movie. If you look at the Batman movie, yeah, it sold a lot of tickets. People loved it. But also at the same time, there have been big blockbuster superhero movies before. There were several last summer and the summer before. I think the Dark Knight will have large amounts of staying power because the writing is so solid that it's going to have this sort of eternal nature that when you watch it... you can watch it 10 times and say, "Wow, this movie is great." Whereas the movies that relied on, for instance, the gimmick of really cool special effects 10 years from now...
* Dan: Or the big famous star. Riding a trend.
* Brandon: Any of these things. You're going to look at them. Maybe they will actually have a flash-in-the-pan. Maybe they will be a successful movie, but if the writing isn't excellent, that's all that is going to come of them. It's going to vanish. If you're relying on your special effects rather than your writing, then your special effects will always be outdated. This is why we can watch the original Star Wars movies and still love them despite the special effects.
* Brandon: Now, movies have a lot of other interactions going on. Fantastic acting can work as well as fantastic writing. But I use these examples because more people are going to be familiar with them. The same thing happens in books however. Let's look at... I'm biased, but let's look at The Wheel of Time. The Wheel of Time books have not only sold a lot of copies, they have spawned a community of fans who are deeply invested in these books, who love these books, who follow them and have been following them for years and years. I'm one of them.
* Howard: And for a long time, I have believed those people were fundamentally flawed. But that's because I had never read the books myself. I haven't read all the books myself. I am 2 1/2 books in and now I see what's going on with these crazy people. I'm starting to get it. I'm not one of them. But I understand them and their behavior is justified.
* Brandon: I can... I could... I'd have to go to my library and point them out, but I could pick out a good dozen books I read that same year as Eye of the World came out. That had big releases, that were big... lots of sales of copies. I don't know whether they sold more than The Wheel of Time or not. I know The Wheel of Time, like any introductory book, most of the time the first book sells the fewest copies until it starts to get rolling. It did not have this huge hardcover release. It was released mostly in paperback. And yet, 20 years later, people are still reading those books. The reason being the depth of the writing. There are layers and layers and layers of things embedded into these stories. And what I've learned is, that comes first. If you can have the other stuff, that's great. But you don't actually need the other stuff because if you have excellent writing, that's enough of a hook in and of itself to carry the book.
* Howard: What are gimmicks that authors have tried or that writers have tried or might be tempted to try?
* Brandon: There's lots of things. The cool twist on the cover is a gimmick. Remember when I...
* Howard: Cover art? That's something a writer has no control over...
* Brandon: But these are things that the book packaging... some of the powerful authors... remember, when I say a gimmick that does not necessarily mean that anyone using one of these is writing poorly.
* Howard: I know.
* Brandon: For instance, I used... anyway. So there are book cover gimmicks. There are this book comes with a CD of expanded information gimmicks. A really great gimmick that I believe David Weber used... is it David Weber? Honor Harrington? He released a CD that came with all of the previous volumes on e-book in the hardcover release. You just got all of them. That's a great gimmick. It was the Baen Free Library, but he actually released a hardcover that came in the back with a CD that had all the previous volumes. So you could buy one and read them all. Great gimmick. Authors? If you're looking at the text of the narrative, the twist ending is a very big temptations gimmick. I don't know. If you can pull it off, it's going to help. It's almost always a good thing. But it doesn't mean you need to have one. If you are writing a story that is focusing on something other than this twisting tortuous plot, then it's okay to not have the plot twist ending.
* Howard: Let me visit this in another way, because I think the temptation to use gimmicks or the temptation to try something other than just really, really strong writing to sell your work stems from a desire to be the next Dan Brown or the next JK Rowling or the next Stephanie Meyer... Somebody who comes out of the gate with a series that makes piles and piles of money rather than being the next... and I don't want to fault any writers I like... but the next Kevin J. Anderson or Eric Flint...
* Brandon: Or Brandon Sanderson...
* Howard: Or Brandon Sanderson. Guys who crank out good books consistently in the strength of just strong writing and years of being really good at it.
* Dan: Trying to be the next whoever is also a symptom of another gimmick which is the bandwagon. Vampires are huge right now. That's going to be my gimmick. I'm going to write a vampire story and it's going to sell a million copies.
* Brandon: Newer writers a lot of the time come up to me and say, "What's the secret? What's the trick?" They're looking for the trick. The trick is write really good writing. Now all of this stuff we talk about...
* Brandon: Also, I would say, the pitch... the Hollywood pitch. That's a gimmick, so to speak, that we use in writing. We may do a podcast on how to pitch your book, in fact I want to. But the concept...
* Howard: The gimmicky pitch in the movie Bolt where the pigeons are pitching the movie idea to the dog. A movie pitch, you expect I'm going to tell you about the story. No, that's not what happens. The pigeon stands there and poses... wait for it... aliens. That was a... the pitch itself was gimmicked. I loved that, because it very nicely satirized pitching.
* Brandon: We'll do one on the pitch. Having a good pitch for your book is a plus. But the concept I'm trying to get across here is write really, really well. Then when you got back, then take a look at what you have and say, "How can I develop a pitch?" Or "How can I best enhance what I have?" Maybe you do need to add a twist ending. But...
* Howard: You gotta have hooks. You gotta have value in there.
* Brandon: You gotta have the in-late-out-early, you've gotta have a damn of the beginning, and all of these things. Even the first line is a gimmick. The fantastic first line is a gimmick. That is good, it will help you, but it will not compensate for a bad first page no matter how good your first line is.
* Howard: I have read a lot of books where I picked it up and read the first line and thought, "Oh, this looks wonderful" because the prose was so neat. Then I realized, "Oh, somebody spend hours crafting the prose in the first paragraph, and then the same amount of time writing the next three chapters."
* Dan: I think one aspect of this is a series. I think series have the tendency if you're not careful to fall into gimmick. Where you set up an interesting situation, an interesting character, an interesting whatever, and then all of those quirks that were so cool the first time, you drag them out too far. You hew too closely to your own formula. And it falls into gimmick, and then the writing starts to suffer. You can see this in a lot of TV shows, especially. House was fantastic the first two seasons. He had some of the best writing on TV. Today it really is just a parody of itself. Because it's, here we have a grumpy guy, here we have our methods... and those have just become gimmicks rather than story elements.
* Brandon: Since we're talking on it, I'll just throw out... one maybe example is my series Alcatraz Versus the Evil Librarians. That series sold based on a gimmick. It really did. The gimmick was evil librarians. In fact, it was such a part of the sales that they, when they were buying the books, Scholastic Press, said as long as he's willing to revise the titles so that evil librarians is in the title. That's one of the main things that we want to do.
* Howard: There were multiple gimmicks and hooks at work for you there. The other is let's play on the popularity of the whole boy wizard thing -- Harry Potter.
* Brandon: Somehow I ended up with a character on the front cover who looked an awful lot like Harry Potter. They changed that for the paperback. But anyway... These things are all gimmicks and it's okay to have those. It certainly helped Alcatraz sell... to the editors at least... and it helped some of the popularity. But once readers crack that book, at that point, the writing has to carry it. That's what I've learned. Focus on the writing, Brandon, and then worry about all this other stuff.

# Season 2 Episode 32 What Dan Learned Last Year

* Dan: The most important thing I learned in the past year is that being a full-time author is a lot more work and different kinds of work than I thought it was going to be.
* Brandon: Okay. Explain?
* Dan: Well, I kind of imagined in my head this delightful paradise in which I got to sit in my pajamas all day at a computer and write these magnificent stories and then send them off and then they would be magically turned into books. That is not apparently how the publishing industry works.
* Brandon: I manage the pajamas part a lot.
* Dan: It turns out that there is a lot of other stuff going on. We've talked about self-employment in the past. I had the shocking realization that in addition to being a writer, I was also a business owner. I spend a lot of time with financial stuff, with taxes. Also there's edits with the book. There's back-and-forth with your editor all the time. Now that we have the Internet and fan things to keep up on, blogging, all this stuff.
* Brandon: Let's break these things down. Businessperson. I think that surprises a lot of us. It surprised me. We don't realize that being a writer equals being a small business owner. When I was young and I thought about writing, I just assumed, "Oh, writers are employed by publishers." Most of you probably know that's not the case, but you are an independent contractor.
* Howard: There are some writers who are employed by their publishers, but those writers are typically columnists employed by newspapers, and that business model is falling apart.
* Brandon: We focus on writing fiction. Writing fiction, specifically novels, but even short stories, you are generally not going to be any kind of staff writer even if you are writing in an established world like Star Wars and something like this. You are being contracted to do this work, essentially. Which makes for all sorts of craziness. We as the general writers... people who dream of being writers, we tend to go into the humanities and have no clue that if this actually pans out, we're going to be small-business owners.
* Dan: In publishing especially, one of the big shocks for me was promotion. Especially if you're big, your publisher will do a lot of promotion for you. But there's also a lot that you have to do for yourself. There's an awful lot of that.
* Brandon: Like what?
* Dan: Now, all of a sudden, my train of thought is gone. One of the things that you have to do is... I've got... okay, I'm sorry, train of thought is not coming back. I thought I could talk myself into it. Howard, you do a lot of self-promotion, tell us about it?
* Brandon: Nice save.
* Howard: I do a lot of self-promotion. I'll start with the Internet stuff. Daily, I'm checking the assorted Schlock Mercenary forums. that's already been frontloaded. Those communities have been established. I have delegated to several people the responsibility of managing the technology sides of those forums. My job is to show up periodically, put in an appearance, say something clever, stop a fight if there is one of those happening, and then move on and get on with other work. It doesn't sound like much, it sounds pretty easy, but if I don't do it, those communities start to fall apart. And those communities are critical for me because the people who are passionate about discussing my work are the people who are passionate about buying the next installment of my work. I need to keep them passionate.
* Brandon: Let's talk about fan interaction. You said the most important thing you learned is that it is more work than you thought. So let's dig in and say what were your expectations, how were they broken, and how can our listeners prepare better?
* Howard: Well, we got the expectations. The expectations were pajamas and computer keyboards.
* Brandon: But what about fan interaction? You knew you were going to have fan interaction...
* Dan: I knew that I would have to do that especially because I've been going to cons for a long time. But the website is a good one. Howard mentioned that. I did not realize going into this the importance of having a website. That, I think, is crucial even for a novelist today. Someone who doesn't rely on the Internet business model the way Howard does. You have to have that website there because that's what people expect. That means I had to design one. Yes, I had someone else build it for me, but I had to tell them everything to put on it.
* Brandon: You had to say I want it to look like this.
* Dan: I had to figure out... I want it to look like this. This is the information that I need. These are the kinds of things that I expect my readers to be looking for. That continues to evolve. I do have a small but growing little forum community there and so that's taking off. The other thing is, one of the cool things is, that the three of us and some other authors share some forum space on Timewaster's Guide <http://www.timewastersguide.com/> I consider part of my job being bringing in other new authors and we've just recently added Aprilynne Pike whose book will have already been out by the time this podcast airs.  
  [Brandon] It came out yesterday, I think.
* Dan: It came out yesterday. She's a new author who I think is going to be very successful. So I spent some time and we brought her on and she shares our forum now. We're trying to build communities like that so we can cross pollinate our fan bases and grow them that way.
* Brandon: So, fan interaction, businessperson... let's talk about... set those things aside. You were also surprised by the amount of time that you spend working that you aren't writing. I've heard you talk about this before. What are you doing during that time?
* Dan: A lot of research. This might just be because I fell into... my first book that got published was one that I already knew a ton about, so I didn't have to do a lot of research. I was already researching serial killers as a hobby, and I didn't consider it work. Now that I'm starting new stuff, there's a lot of work. Now that an editor is going through my previous stuff with a fine tooth comb, I realized that I have to actually support all the wild claims I make and the descriptions that I use of embalming and of criminal profiling. So I need to go back and find more accurate ways to depict those things. That's a lot of work that I didn't realize was coming.
* Brandon: We're back. Still talking with Dan about what he learned last year. Let's talk about editing, Dan. This took more time than you anticipated it would take?
* Dan: Yes, it did. I guess I didn't... not so much that I anticipated it not taking much time, but I wasn't expecting to be doing it at all. Obviously you do, but...
* Howard: You thought you were going to hand your book to somebody else and have them make it good?
* Dan: Yeah. But for example, I was just starting my third book when my editor sent my first book back to me and said, "All right. Here's all the changes. I've gone through this. Here's all these suggestions for it. Here's all these things I noticed. Go for it."
* Brandon: And we need it in a week.
* Dan: Yeah.
* Brandon: That's one of the things that really surprised me was how quickly they would want these things. I've said it before. I would write my books years ahead, send them in. They would sit there and sit there and sit there. But you never look at the book that's years ahead, you look at the one that's due next month. Eventually, they would get to mine. I thought naively that if I turned it in early, they would work on it early, and none of us would have...nah, that's not how it happened.
* Howard: The reason that expectation for authors is broken is because we don't have firm schedules. The publication company has a firm schedule. They've got employees in that office 9 to 5 or 7 to 8 or whatever the hours they have to work to get this done. They've got a publication schedule, a marketing schedule, a publicity schedule and you have to plug into that. When it's time to do edits, they know that they can count on you to drop whatever you are doing and write some stuff. Which is why it's good to be me.
* Brandon: Well, maybe. Really... it really happens. I was... my eyes were completely opened. Turning things in early and then them still coming and saying, "Can't you meet this deadline?"
* Howard: It doesn't matter. If they work on it early... the only reason for them to work on it early is if they think they can find a publication slot for it. If they get an early slot for it, that means it's still hurry up and get these edits done in a week.
* Brandon: Oh, now we need this done tomorrow...
* Dan: There's a lot of little emergencies like that, that show up. After... right now the US... because of the weird publishing, the US publishers are just now getting to the point where they are looking at my first book. They were in one of their meetings with it and the marketing people had read it and they really loved it and they were thinking about how can we place this and where should we go with this. My editor mentioned that he had just finished the second one and that it was also really good. They said, "Oh, great, we want to read it." So he called me and he said, "Hey, they want to read this but I want you to change some stuff first and we need this by tomorrow morning." So I had to write an entire new chapter and fix several other things to make this presentable just to the marketing people, let alone the... then another week that I had to spend later to get it ready to go to the copyedit team.
* Brandon: Then there's also things like the cover copy and the marketing copy which are the descriptions of your book that will go on the jacket or that will go to the marketing folks. Those will just come to you and the editor will say, "Hey, I wrote this. I just turned in." You'll go into panic mode because you read this and it gives away the ending. You're like, why did you give away the ending? Oh, I didn't realize I was... or someone in marketing wrote the copy. You have to be able to drop everything and focus on getting that rewritten or giving suggestions to your editor on how to rewrite it or this and that. I would say... taking this and [garbled -- spinning?] it toward our listeners... what can you do? You can learn to deal with interruptions. I think that's going to be... and I don't mean interruptions like the phone rings...
* Howard: Task switching. Be able to stop writing and start writing something completely different. Be able to stop writing and start writing a new synopsis or new marketing copy. Stop writing the middle of chapter 3 and start editing chapter 61 of the book that you wrote two years ago.
* Brandon: There's always a bump there. It always stops me. Then the bigger bump is getting back into what I was doing before. That's a killer of a bump. I'm not sure how to suggest to people that they practice for that because it has blindsided me a number of times. It has ruined books... ones I haven't published... because I get stopped for several months and I can't come back to that book. I eventually have to scrap the whole project because I'm... I wasn't used to it...
* Howard: Whatever momentum you had, was gone.
* Dan: I think one of the ways that people can prepare themselves for that kind of thing is... first of all, we've talked about a schedule. Try to get yourself onto a schedule if you can. The publisher obviously has their own deadlines they need to meet. Try to set those for yourself where possible, so that you can get used to working...
* Brandon: Giving yourself deadlines.
* Dan: Inside of that environment.
* Howard: Giving yourself deadlines. Working to a schedule. The other thing that I've found... I've had a pretty rigid schedule for quite a while. When I started working on the XDM project with Tracy Hickman, I had to change my schedule in order to get the work done. Sometimes you have to do that. You look at your schedule and you say well, I need to squeeze another three hours out of the day for the next month in order to get this done. Where are those three hours coming from? Be flexible enough to adjust your schedule. Then it's going to get nudged back. It's crazy. But being able to do that is one of the abilities... as I alluded to earlier... one of the abilities that your publisher or editor expects you to have.
* Dan: I think in terms of task switching that actually might be easier for the struggling author than it is for the full-time author because that's kind of the environment they write in any way. At least I used to.
* Howard: So it's not something they need to be practicing?
* Brandon: I never did.
* Dan: You never did because you had built your life around the writing schedule that you wanted which is fantastic if you can do it. I wrote I Am Not a Serial Killer in two and a half-hour chunks every night for a while.
* Brandon: But that was... you weren't stopping for three months in the middle of the book. This is what I'm talking about. Task switching is you've got to put that book aside and be able to get back into it. Training yourself to be able to get back into things is very difficult for someone who is an outline writer like me. That... how shall I say... a lot of discovery writers, it's very easy for them to write themselves in. With me, there's momentum. I spend a lot of time planning, and then I start the ball rolling, and then I'm blowing through my outline to the ending. If I stop, I've got to start that momentum again, and that's very difficult for me to do.

# Season 2 Episode 33 How Not to Be Overwhelmed

* Brandon: Nameless came to me and said, "I'm having trouble. It's harder for me to write now because I feel so overwhelmed by all of the things that you've talked about in this podcast that we have to do." I thought about that and it's actually a very good comment, very astute. We went through... here are some of the things we talked about this season: setting, character, viewpoint, plot twists, writing groups, endings, three act formula, romance, publishing, violence, beginnings, worldbuilding, marketing -- we did a ton of different stuff. It's about nine hours worth of podcasting.
* Dan: That's on top of last season's...
* Brandon: How do you not get overwhelmed by all of the stuff that you need to do? The same thing happens when you read a writing book. You would read a writing book and there are so many different things that you want to try out, that it can be daunting. Advice to our listeners?
* Dan: At the risk of obsoleting ourselves, let's go back to... the thing that's going to help you the most is practice. That's going to help you so much more than listening to us.
* Howard: That's why the podcast is only 15 minutes long. We want you to listen for 15 minutes and then go write.
* Dan: Then go do something.
* Howard: We didn't mean for Nameless to listen to eight hours of episodes all at one go and then try to go write.
* Dan: Eight hours straight of us telling him all the things he's doing wrong. Allow yourself to write a bad book and your next one will be better and your next one after that will be better and you'll become better as you practice.
* Brandon: This mindset is very useful. I've talked about it before, too. I emphasize it in my class. The mindset is treating writing like learning to play the piano. Understanding that when you begin, you don't expect to be an expert at the beginning. When you are practicing your piano, sometimes you will practice certain aspects of it... you'll work on this scale, sometimes you'll work on this other thing. I don't play the piano, I play the trumpet. You'll work on your lip movement for the trumpet, you'll work on breathing exercises here, you'll work on scales here, you'll work on tone here -- you can't do it all at once. That's okay, you're practicing.
* Howard: Perfect one thing at a time.
* Dan: Don't be overwhelmed by the fact that what you write is permanent. When you're playing the trumpet or the piano, it's just noise that dissipates into the air and it's not saved forever. Whereas if you're writing something, then you've got those sheets of paper or those computer files that are going to be staring at you reminding you how horrible they are. Just don't let that bother you.
* Brandon: You can always fix it in post. Remember that. You can work on different things at different times. I once read a writing book by a famous agent, which a lot of the stuff the agent said I agreed with. But one of the things the agent said I disagreed with horribly. This was Scott Meredith -- very big, important agent, knew a lot of things. But one of the things he said was you want to train yourself to get it right on the first try. That smacked me completely wrong right then. Now what he was saying is correct, you want to learn to do the best work you can. But there is too much going on in the novel. Mister Meredith -- he's passed away, but if you're listening on the other side -- I disagree wholeheartedly because you can't do it all in the first draft.
* Howard: Focusing on getting it right the first time is not the way to get it right the first time. Focus on getting it wrong and learning from your mistakes.
* Brandon: Or focus on getting one thing right. I need to get the characters right in this chapter I'm working on... I really need to find their voices...
* Howard: Focus on getting it written. Focus on writing something. And yeah, telling a good story. And yeah, learn from your mistakes. I think that's the most important thing is to be able to write something, have somebody else look at it, and say, "I really can't tell the difference between these two characters." Then you go back and say, "Oh, gosh, you can't. I need to work on that." And you work on that.
* Dan: You see this with sports all the time. Whenever some newscaster is interviewing some poor basketball player after they just lost a game, they will always say, "Well, we did this wrong. We need to work on this. Our next game will be better." You never see a basketball player say, "I really need to go back and play this game again and get it right." You gotta move on, you gotta improve your skills.
* Howard: There have been a couple of times where I've seen a player say, "We played the best game we could, and they just played a lot better. Howard] Focusing on getting it right the first time is not the way to get it right the first time. Focus on getting it wrong and learning from your mistakes.
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* Dan: You see this with sports all the time. Whenever some newscaster is interviewing some poor basketball player after they just lost a game, they will always say, "Well, we did this wrong. We need to work on this. Our next game will be better." You never see a basketball player say, "I really need to go back and play this game again and get it right." You gotta move on, you gotta improve your skills.
* Howard: There have been a couple of times where I've seen a player say, "We played the best game we could, and they just played a lot better."
* Brandon: Let's look at our friend Nameless. He is so overwhelmed he can't even start writing a book. What advice do you have for him, not even being able to sit down and put pen to page or fingers to keyboard? I'll give you a little more background... He's been planning his book for years and years and years and has never... he's a world builder, he's all this stuff, the more he works on it, the more daunting it is for him to actually consider starting it, and the more he learns about writing...
* Howard: In part, that's because he is seeing how huge this world is. Beginning to tell that story is just too enormous. My advice would be to go into the outline, pick your favorite scene, and sit down and write that scene. Don't worry as you're writing it that it hasn't been foreshadowed or this character quirk hasn't been explained. Just write that scene. Have fun with the dialogue, have fun with the action. Write it. It may be as he starts to write... as you start to write, you, Nameless one who are listening right now, it may be that what happens is you develop momentum and you realize, "Oh, wow, this is fun. I'm going to keep going and do the scene that comes next." That's fantastic. Write from that scene to the end of the book. Write from that scene to the end of the series. At some point, an editor is going to tell you, regardless of where you started, the editor is going to look at what you wrote and say "I don't really think you started in the right place."
* Brandon: Yeah, they do that all the time.
* Howard: They do that all the time. So start where you know it will be fun and enjoy yourself.
* Brandon: What I may say would be, "You know what, you need to practice. Set aside this story and write something else. Pick one of the writing prompts that we give you or one you can find online, and write 10 pages on that writing prompt. Get yourself into the habit of writing and do that once a week."
* Dan:Just based on your description of this nameless friend and his idea he's been working on for years... That is the problem I see all the time, I went through it myself, and I call it the great golden idea. That is when someone wants to be an author, they start developing this great book, and they're going to write it and it's going to be awesome. They just are in love with it. That is almost the most overwhelming thing, you don't want to damage it, you don't want to ruin that great golden idea by not being good enough yet. So that paralyzes you. That is the same kind of problem we see with the eternal first chapter rewrite where they just haven't got it right yet so they want to keep with it. Someone who edits... who goes back and rewrites the same book 4 times instead of moving on to another book. It's that they don't want to lose their great golden idea. You know what, you're a writer. You have a million ideas. Maybe what you need to do is write something else first. Maybe what you need to do is pick the favorite scene out of your golden idea and go for that. But there will always be more ideas coming, you don't need to worry about burning this one.
* Brandon: The more you write, the more you will create them. You may think you've only got this one idea, but if you start writing, they will start flooding your brain.
* Howard: Brandon, have you written your great golden idea yet?
* Brandon: Yes. It didn't turn out very well.
* Dan: Neither did mine.
* Howard: Perfect. But people look at Mistborn -- people look at the magic system and all that and think, "Oh, wow, if only I could come up with an idea as wonderful as that." That wasn't your great golden idea. Now, that was something that came to you after you screwed up other stuff.
* Brandon: Exactly. You've got it exactly. I was lucky in that when I began, I had no clue how bad of a writer I was. You find this, for teenagers and early twentysomethings, no clue... They're lucky. If you're able to start in that embryonic stage, then as you learn new things point-by-point you can incorporate them. That's a wonderful place to be. It doesn't happen to all of us. A lot of people decide that they want to start writing when they are older, and they have read so much and they have studied it so much, that they know all this stuff that they're supposed to do. Unlike myself who just sat down and started writing. So instead of being able to learn point-by-point like I did, they have all of this. They are in a nice position because they can pick and choose, but it's overwhelming because there is so much.
* Dan: I've got a friend... I've been reading her manuscript because she wrote a book and she wanted to get some notes on it and because I was dumb and didn't realize I would be as busy as I was, I said, "Sure, I can read that for you." Please note, audience, I don't do this anymore. I was reading through this and I said, "You are obviously a great storyteller. This one is not working. What are you working on next?" She said, "No. I'm just going to fix this one, with the notes you give me." I eventually convinced her to go ahead and start something new. Once she finally took that step, started something new and moved on, she realized that this golden idea that she had started with was not as cool as she thought it was. Her next book excites her so much more than that first one did. That's a major milestone for a first-time writer, learning to set your golden idea free and start on something new.
* Brandon: Here's another thing I might suggest. Suggestion for Nameless. The break it down... break it apart... break apart from what you're doing and also break it down. Remember that books are written letter by letter, word by word. I would suspect I don't know this about Nameless, but I would suspect from people I've known who have done this before, they have spent years and years worldbuilding, but have not spent very much time on the plot itself. It's much more fun to devise all of these wonderful worldbuilding things then to think of actually what's going to happen. I would say switch tracks, give yourself a timeframe during which you can spend. Say I'm going to take one month. I've got one month and I'm going to work on the plot. And break it down. That's the goal with the plot -- goal, pick out what you want to happen, break it into smaller pieces, break that into smaller pieces, combine those pieces and make scenes.
* Dan: I would add to that, that breaking it down into character in addition to or instead of plot is a great way to go, because that's how I got I Am Not a Serial Killer started.