Notes on

Writing Science Fiction and Fantasy

Lecture series

by Brandon Sanderson

with help from Brandon Mull

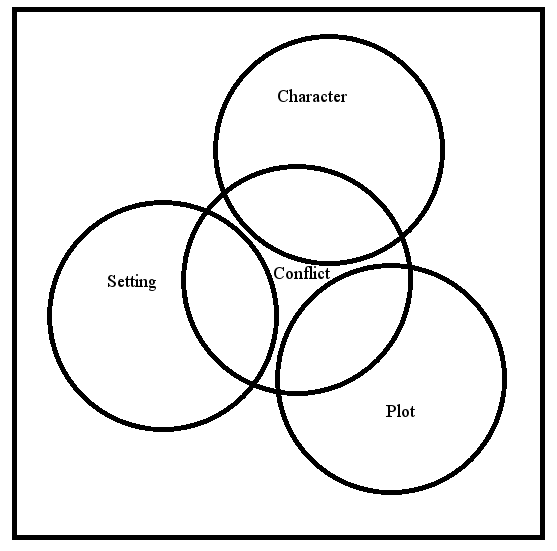
Brigham Young University 318R

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Overview:

The Box contains the story.



The story is plot, setting, and character tied together by conflict.

The prose is a window where readers can look into the box.

You will work your whole life on making better boxes.

I. Character: Cook up characters the reader will relate to, and make everything you write show the characters’ motivations.

II. Setting: Create a place filled with things you’re passionate about and magic that provides wonder and awesomeness without being *deus ex machina*.

III. Plot: Start with a character who wants something, then continually make promises to the reader and fulfill them in surprising yet inevitable ways.

IV. Prose: Create a pane of glass that colors everything in the story with the narrative type, the characters’ motivations, and your voice as an author.

V: Business: After writing a work of passion, exploit the work for money by researching agents/editors who would like it, and sending them well-crafted pitches.

This is a class to give tools for beginning writers to use, not rules to follow. Your homework is to go write.

1. Character
   1. A writer makes people care about things that never happened, spinning gold out of straw. (Mull) You do this by making readers relate to the characters.
      1. Five ways to make relatable characters:
         1. The character is everyman. Reader sees themselves as the character.
         2. The character is superman/highly competent. Reader wishes they could be character.
         3. The character must want something strongly enough that the reader also wants it. (Mull)
         4. The character must create emotional reaction in the reader (laughter, hatred, etc.) and then characters will be real to the reader. (Mull)
         5. The character must have relationships (family, romance, mentor, friend, etc.) If the characters matter to each other, they matter to the reader. (Mull)
         6. Need a little of each in every character.
      2. Being nerdy means taking weird, imaginary things and treating them authentically. This reveals truth that reality cannot show. (Mull)
   2. Cooking up characters takes a real chef:
      1. Build characters with three sliding scales:
         1. Likeability, competence, proactivity
            1. To make a character likeable, have another character say why they like them.
            2. Shift sliders during story. Foreshadow these shifts.
      2. Superman vs scrooge
         1. Superman: character accomplishes things.
         2. Scrooge: character changes themselves.
         3. Each character needs some of both.
      3. Characters must overcome flaws and handicaps.
         1. Handicaps (things that are not their fault, or out of their control)
         2. Flaws (things that are their fault)
      4. Take character tropes and mix and match:
         1. e.g. mentor who is also the villain, funny sidekick who is also the muscle, loyal friend who is also the chosen one.
         2. Mismatched characteristics can be good: e.g. mortician who is afraid of the dead.
      5. Dossiers
         1. Look up dossiers of characters that writers use.
         2. Write a monologue based on a dossier to create a character.
      6. You don't have to "know thirteen-year-old girls" to write about one. No one knows them, not even thirteen-year-old girls. You only have to know the girl you're writing about. (Mull)
   3. Characters go wrong when:
      1. They are a result of being built to suit a story, rather than having life outside of it.
      2. The reader doesn’t know what the motivation is.
      3. Sexism/Racism
         1. Understand these issues.
         2. Don’t write women as objects, obviously.
         3. But don’t overcorrect by making them awesome in every way.
         4. Write fully developed characters who are women/minorities, but not just one!
         5. Give all characters quirks, archs, dreams etc.
         6. We all make these mistakes. It’s a simple writing mistake with writing bad characters. Don’t react angrily if someone says your writing is racist. You’re not racist; you’re just making writing mistakes that make your writing racist.
   4. Your descriptions of the world should also describe characters. Every line should do multiple things.
      1. Do exercise: write out how different characters would describe the same thing.
      2. Relevant especially for first person and third person limited.
      3. Five ways to use characters as filters through which reader sees the world (P.R.O.M.S.):
         1. Past
            1. Characters do not pop into existence when the story starts. Every character has things in the past that will shape who they are.
            2. Things in story will remind characters of past.
         2. Relationships
            1. Relationships are foundation of most stories
            2. Spend majority of story with 2-3 characters interacting in interesting ways.
            3. Convey how people feel about each other through:

the way they describe the world

the way they engage in dialogue

* + - * 1. Let it color every line of description, even un-obvious things.

Not “he sat down” but “he put a book down and sat on it so he’d be higher than his brother.”

* + - * 1. Actions should convey personality and relationships.
      1. Obligations
         1. Social constructs, culture
         2. e.g. Koreans do not show bottom of foot to one another; must show courtesy even to those they don’t like.
      2. Motivations
         1. Losing sight of motivation is prime reason for characters to be stilted.
         2. e.g. character says something to move plot along, but reader doesn’t know why that character would say it
         3. e.g. character belabors a point, but reader doesn’t understand enough about character to care
      3. Sensibilities
         1. Unique brain chemistry that makes a character see things in a different way
         2. e.g. when a character sees pencils: “Ooo, I want to draw something!” vs. “One of them is pointed the wrong way.”
         3. Passions/Likes/dislikes: e.g. a dog person describing a dog would be different than a cat person describing a dog… or a starving person during the war.

1. Setting (World Building)
   1. Learning curve:
      1. The iceberg:
         1. People want to be immersed in a new place.
         2. Your job is to convince the reader that even a character’s underwear is part of a different world.
         3. Make sure you don’t show the whole iceberg too soon.
      2. Reader eventually becomes an expert in your world. Choose how steep your curve is.  Readers like learning the things, places, characters, etc. unless they become overwhelmed.
         1. It’s ok to confuse your readers, just have a character say, “Hey, this is confusing,” to give the reader permission to be confused.
      3. Bring out the characters first.  Then gradually introduce the world and the larger story.
         1. World building should not be at expense of character, but hopefully you do all three things well.
      4. Maid and Butler dialogue: when characters talk about the plot/setting without having a reason to do so. Avoid this.
   2. There is the physical world and the cultural world.
      1. Find something to build in the cultural world besides just weapons, language, history.
         1. Economics, education, jobs, laws… something to set your book apart.
         2. Don’t take too many English classes. Learn about what you’re most passionate to use in your stories.
         3. No need to be an expert in every area you write about. But read up on it a little and have an expert critique it.
   3. We're good at combining things, not making things up entirely. A unicorn is just a horse with a horn.
   4. Be careful when borrowing things from our world.
      1. Don't use strawmen.
         1. Don't have something that's not the Catholic Church but is exactly like the Catholic Church and they're all evil.
         2. Don't have one religious person who is always an idiot.
   5. Magic systems
      1. Good magic systems have rules. But reader doesn't need to know or understand all the rules. So it's a mixture: avoid *deus ex machina* but also provide a sense of wonder.
      2. Tolkien is a mixture.
         1. Ring: rules are it makes you invisible, but Sauron can see you.
         2. Gandalf: not really sure what his rules are...
      3. Brandon's four laws of writing magic:
         1. Law #1: your ability to solve problems with magic in a satisfying way is directly proportional to how well the reader understands said magic.
            1. If magic isn't being used to solve problems, then the magic doesn't need rules the reader understands.  Then magic creates sense of awe, wonder, or fear.
            2. If magic solves problems, it needs to follow satisfying plot/foreshadowing; that “Aha!” moment when the reader says "I should've seen it!"
            3. When heroes win, it needs to feel earned.
            4. Hard magic system vs. soft magic system:

Hard magic: rules are explained and repeatable.  Isn't scientific, but dependable. Limitations make things exciting.  Rules can be stretched if it happens in a satisfying way, but not broken.  Don't say your system is hard and then push it gradually towards soft.

* + - 1. Law #2: Flaws are more interesting than powers.
         1. Focus on what magic can't do. A good character must be tested in ways they are not prepared for.
         2. Ways to make magic limited:

Cost. Connect magic to something else: Economic, moral, mental, physical cost.

Can fly, but only ten feet high.

Telekinetic, but only with metal objects.

Unintended consequences.

Only works every other Tuesday.

* + - 1. Law #3: Go deeper into a magic system, not wider
         1. A few things that are well explored will feel cooler than a large number of things that are shallow.

e.g. Two magical races that have a deep relationship is better than twenty that each have only one gimmick.

* + - * 1. Consider always leaving holes in system to give sense of wonder.
        2. Characters are themselves discovering more about the magic system.
        3. Start at 75% hard magic, giving yourself wiggle room as story progresses.
        4. But if your reader needs a spreadsheet to keep track of magic, simplify.
        5. Magic should have elegant powers and elegant limitations.
      1. Law #0: Always err on the side of what is AWESOME!!!
         1. Because does Brandon actually follow these laws? Not exactly.
         2. Fantasy/sci-fi is ultimately about saying "Aaaaahhhhh that was AWESOME!"
         3. Stick with the original, awesome idea you're passionate about, and use these laws as tools to create an exciting story.
         4. e.g. "Scotty is an awesome genius who can solve any technical problem" can be an ok magic system if you add "BUT we need to buy him five minutes of time.”

1. Plot
   1. A great plot will:
      1. Make promises.
      2. Fulfill those promises in a surprising, yet satisfying and inevitable way.
   2. Two different styles to writing plots:
      1. Discovery writer: creates characters and sees where they go as they write.
         1. Discovery may feel exciting at first.
         2. Easier to write a good middle.
         3. May have lame endings.
         4. May need lots of revision.
         5. Should try stopping 2/3 before end of book and take stock of what promises you’ve made and how to fulfill them.
      2. Outline writer: makes an outline of story before writing book.
         1. Easier to write a good ending.
         2. May end up feeling wooden.
      3. Both are ok. You decide.
      4. Brandon is an outline writer for plot and setting, but a discovery writer for character.
      5. Just don't get bogged down in rewriting your beginning chapters or your outline before forging ahead and finishing the book.
   3. A Recipe for a Plot:
      1. Decide if the story will primarily be:
         1. Characters vs. setting
         2. Characters vs. characters
      2. Start with a hook
         1. A hook is a character who wants something.
         2. Getting the reader/editor to read past the first page isn’t about your awesome plot or big ideas, but:
            1. Doing world-building without info-dumping.
            2. Doing viewpoint and voice that is engaging and evocative.
            3. Introducing conflict/motion/something going wrong.
         3. Characters are the reason readers keep reading.
   4. Plot frameworks:
      1. Three Acts
         1. Act one
            1. Introduction: setting, tone, character setup
            2. Crisis point: point of no return for protagonist
         2. Act two
            1. Things get worse
            2. Protagonist tries things but fails

Low point

* + - * 1. Do or die moment
      1. Act three
         1. Satisfying conclusion
         2. Make good on promise
         3. Reader must accept it as the ending
    1. Hero’s Journey/Hero of 1000 Faces/Monomyth
       1. Describes a story as a circle instead of three acts.
       2. Starts at home.
       3. Character crosses a threshold. They must change. They acknowledge they are willing to change… after initial refusal. Mentor is important here.
       4. Goes into a strange world.
       5. Enters trials… often three of them.
       6. Mentor dies.
       7. Receives magical boon.
       8. Ends in a figurative death/underworld.
       9. Returns from underworld.
       10. Apotheosis - understanding God.
       11. Theft of power of some kind.
       12. Returns home with magical boon/elixir.
    2. Rags to riches
       1. Person out of place being persecuted.
       2. Receives unexpected help.
       3. Proves themselves.
       4. Rules over those who persecuted them.
    3. Underdog sports
       1. Loner outcast who has a special talent.
       2. Meets a group to show it off.
       3. Group is divided, and fails.
       4. Loner becomes part of team.
       5. Team learns to work together and succeeds.
  1. Cook vs. chef: Don't follow a recipe slavishly. Invent. Be the boss.
  2. Ask why these frameworks work.
  3. Copy these formats and copy other authors, but make it original by:
     1. Making the characters passionate about things you're passionate about.
     2. Add new settings to these frameworks
     3. Figure out different versions of these elements. Mix genres and settings.
  4. Use frameworks to say, “Hey that's the story I've been trying to write all along. Let's see if this framework works.”
  5. Try/fail cycle
     1. Characters must be active, not just passively having things happen to them.
     2. Characters try things. Two possible outcomes:
        1. Succeeds, BUT…
        2. Fails, AND…
        3. Success and failure must always lead to something else.
  6. Plot has three parts: beginning, middle, end
     1. Beginning
        1. Characters, premise can hook you, but those are really part of the promise.
           1. e.g. promise that this story will be important to relatable characters you care about.
           2. e.g. funny banter promises the book will make you laugh.
        2. An interesting premise promises you will be amazed/horrified, etc.
           1. Must choose at beginning how strange/familiar story will feel. Can’t change too much throughout book.
           2. e.g. *I Am Not a Serial Killer* is flawed because it doesn't promise to be a supernatural monster book, but it is.
           3. At least give hints.
        3. Start with scene that sets the tone/microcosm
     2. Middle
        1. Always be fulfilling promises.
           1. Middle is hardest but also most important. A cool ending isn't enough.  The middle shows how the ending has been earned.
           2. Every chapter has to be interesting
           3. Usually when people say the plot was interesting, they mean the pacing was good.
           4. Twists and turns are not the hallmark of a good plot; promises are.
           5. If you are never fulfilling promises in a fulfilling way, the promise you are making is that the reader will never get fulfillment.
           6. So withhold less than you think you need to.
           7. Spread out awesomeness throughout story.
           8. Discovery has to be as interesting as the question.
           9. You need to build trust with the reader by fulfilling promises.
           10. Established authors can get away with more, since they've built trust.
        2. Overlapping Brackets
           1. Brackets are making and fulfilling promises: [Make a promise…. Fulfill the promise]
           2. You’re constantly opening brackets and closing brackets, like a huge math problem.
           3. Brackets within brackets{...[...]...[...(...)...]...}
           4. Nesting plot cycles: some success along the way, with complete resolution while other plot cycles are continuing.
           5. Promises are fulfilled through plot cycles.
           6. A plot cycle is trouble, decisions, and consequences (Mull).

Trouble

What is some trouble we can throw at our characters?

Put characters up tree, throw rocks at them, then bring them back down.

Make several different types/levels of trouble, e.g. Quidditch game AND Voldemort.

You gotta be mean to your characters.

If you're a nice person and a writer, that's two strikes against you.

Trouble has to feel unbearable. Not even Jesus could bear facing his suffering.

Characters make decisions to confront trouble

Make sure it's not always the smartest decision.

Sometimes they are frustratingly inactive.

Consequences

Good consequences must be earned by:

Being clever

Working hard

Sacrificing

Changing

* + - * 1. Foreshadowing is how you fulfill promises in a surprising way without breaking your promises.
      1. Change:
         1. If your middle seems pointless, it’s because you’re ignoring the idea of change.
         2. At the end of every chapter, you should be able to say what has changed.
      2. Hardest thing as a writer is picking which scene to show, and what to skip through. (Mull)
         1. Don't bore people.
         2. Write your guilty pleasure.
         3. Don't write what you think other people want to see.
      3. Readers need to experience progress.
         1. Methods of creating a desire for progress:

Mysteries, romances, relationships, travelogues, time bombs, overcoming a flaw, etc.

* 1. Endings
     1. All promises are fulfilled.
     2. Must feel surprising, yet inevitable and satisfying.
     3. Can't hold out too much hope for multiple possible endings.
        1. e.g. *Trueblood* series left most readers unsatisfied because there were too many possible love interests for the protagonist.  Most readers were disappointed because she didn’t choose their favorite suitor. *Twilight* was more satisfying because there were only two suitors, and her choice was foreshadowed.
  2. Writer’s block
     1. Saying you have writer's block is like telling the doctor you have a headache.  There are many possible causes/solutions.
     2. There are two main causes:
        1. Something is fundamentally wrong with the story, and I can't continue to write this character without changing everything. But this is rare… 1:100.  Don't assume this is the case.
        2. Other times it's just a bad day - feeling cruddy about life for some reason. Imposter syndrome.  Or just don't feel like writing.
     3. Get beyond it and write anyway. Write badly, but write.
     4. Write SOMETHING. Have ninjas attack. Change viewpoint. Change location. Make something go wrong you weren't planning on.
     5. Write a monologue from a character about their motivations.
     6. 9/10 times you do this, you'll realize it doesn't suck.  Trust your skills, not your mood.
     7. Even if it does suck, you'll see how to fix it.

1. Prose
   1. "Prose is the panel of glass through which you see the story." - George Orwell
      1. Prose is the window the reader looks through to see the story inside of the box.
      2. Prose is how you color everything in the story.
   2. Three types of narratives:
      1. First person
         1. Need to focus on what the narrator is actually focusing on.
         2. Immediately immersive.
         3. Focus on main character.
         4. Voice is very natural.
         5. Building sympathy is easy.
         6. Easy to have an untrustworthy narrator.
         7. You can address the audience.
         8. Not great for immersing reader in a large world.
         9. Default for YA fiction.
         10. Types:
             1. Memoir
             2. Epistolary – novel made up of letters. Today’s books use text messages, blog posts, etc.
             3. Cinematic first person:

No direct audience

As if you’re right in their head

* + - * 1. Hybrid: narrator who is somewhat omniscient

Begins like, “Let me tell you the story of…”

Lots of classic books use this

Drawback is it removes tension: you know the narrator survives.

* + 1. Unlimited/omniscient third person
       1. Can narrate viewpoints from any character.
       2. It’s omniscient if you ever say, “But little did he know…”
       3. Difficult because it seems strange when there's a character whose viewpoint you don't narrate. How do you choose which viewpoints to show?
       4. You create suspense because the reader knows something is going to happen. e.g. the reader knows who the traitor is.
    2. Third person limited:
       1. Story is related through one person’s viewpoint.
       2. Create suspense because the reader doesn’t know what will happen.
       3. Default for epic fantasy.
    3. Second person basically doesn't exist
       1. Used in choose-your-own-adventure books.
       2. If used, should not be just a gimmick.
       3. Done well very infrequently.
    4. First person and third person limited are your main tools.
    5. The trick is to learn either FP or TPL to show plot, character, setting… without showing plot, character, setting.
  1. Don’t dump info. Convey information in a fun way.
     1. Show from character’s viewpoint in a scene; don’t show anything else
        1. Do not write: “Earl came into the room.”
        2. Write: “He heard the door slam, and then… footsteps.”
        3. Establish character has blindspots
           1. Make reader say "This character is an idiot, I hope they get better." Not "This character is an idiot, I'm going to put the book down."
           2. Make it so reader doesn't notice the idiocy right away, and then another character points it out later.
  2. Goal is not to describe everything, but give essential information with flavor
     1. Describe one stark, concrete detail and allowing reader to paint in the rest is better word painting than describing the entire room.
        1. e.g. “Bullet holes in window” allows readers to evoke the wider setting of the room.
  3. Story can have lots of viewpoints.
     1. Harder to have untrustworthy narrator.
     2. You want every viewpoint to feel distinct.
     3. But can have some similarities, same author's style.
     4. World is directly colored by each characters view.
     5. Omniscient: smooth narration, except punctuated by thought bubbles from various characters.
  4. Tense
     1. Choose present or past tense and stay consistent.
     2. The two are very similar. Reader doesn't pay much attention to it.
     3. YA standard is present tense.
  5. Voice is most important thing to have as a writer. (Mull)
     1. Agents mostly look for voice.
     2. Voice is what you sound like as a storyteller.
     3. The music you hear that you think storytelling should sound like.
     4. You don't get paid for your story, but how you tell it.
  6. But don’t worry too much about how to develop voice.
     1. It will come out of what you have read and what you like in writing.
        1. What kind of prose do you like?
        2. What do you like about them?
        3. How do they enhance the story?
     2. Hallmarks of your voice will come so easily it will even be frustrating.
        1. You may notice you use a certain adjective too often.  In Word, use search and replace to highlight all instances of the word, and scroll through to see if you want to replace some with a different word.
  7. Translucent vs. stained glass
     1. Orwell makes prose as translucent as possible.
     2. Some write like a stain glass window. It may distract from the story, but that can be ok to some extent.
  8. Dialogue: M.I.C.R.O.
     1. Motive
        1. Good dialogue keeps attention on what the character wants in life
        2. Number one cause of stilted dialogue is because there is only explanation, not motives.
        3. Everything must come from a character’s motive, even when you need to info-dump to explain something.
           1. The art of the info-dump:

Story cannot work without this info, so you need to explain it.

World building is spinach. You need to blend it into a smoothie to make it taste good.

Use characters as conduits/filters of info.

* + 1. Individuality
       1. Should tell characters apart even without dialogue tags.
       2. Easy, and easily overdone ways of varying characters’ dialogue:
          1. Dialect

A large number of readers will just skip over dialect

Dialect can easily become a gross stereotype

You can just sprinkle it in instead

Or have other characters basically repeat what was said in dialect to make it understood

Even Chewbacca and R2D2 can be understood through other characters

* + - * 1. Word choice

But, for example, intelligent people don't actually use bigger words in normal conversation

* + - 1. Stronger ways to vary dialogue:
         1. Some are more aggressive vs. circumspect in conversation
         2. How excited do they get?
         3. Varying sentence size
      2. Motive and individuality are most important parts of dialogue.
    1. Conflict
       1. Every dialogue section has conflict.
       2. Doesn't mean argument necessarily.
       3. Must be tension in everything in the book.
       4. e.g. someone is too busy to talk. Trying to get info in roundabout way. No mutual trust.  One person is impatient with how far behind another is. One isn't picking up on social cues.
    2. Realistic vs. elevated dialogue
       1. Decide how realistic you want dialogue to be and aim for that
       2. Writing realistic dialogue exactly like people talk can be grating e.g. full of "ummms" and pauses etc.
       3. Elevated/Shakespearean:
          1. There is a tradition in dialogue where we pretend people are more eloquent than they actually are.
          2. e.g. Joss Whedon's constantly witty characters
          3. Too elevated can feel overwhelming for reader.
       4. Choose a goal in between to aim for.
       5. Shifting a scene to more realistic dialogue can help with relatability.
       6. Test audiences can help.
    3. Objective
       1. Every scene must achieve a goal set by the author.
       2. e.g. characters must argue about decision to make, thus advancing the plot; two characters meet for romantic liaison, thus advancing their relationship; or we need to explain why dragons from Venus are eating cars.
  1. Authors who can write great dialogue usually do better than those who write great narrative.
  2. Pyramid of Abstraction
     1. Bulk of writing should be concrete (bottom of the pyramid). Concrete language grounds reader in a scene. Then you can start to get abstract (top of pyramid).
     2. Don’t want reader to drift away too far up the pyramid.
     3. Not too much navel-gazing.
     4. Strong writing pulls reader to bottom of pyramid… to an extent.
     5. “Dog” is still an abstract idea. “A wet mangey poodle wallowed in a puddle” is concrete.
     6. Show, don’t tell.
        1. Experience is more powerful and memorable than telling about something.
           1. Do not say: “Earl was a tall man.”
           2. Do say: “Earl ducked under the doorframe as he entered the room.”
           3. Do not say: “Earl was a nervous man.”
           4. Do say: “Earl quickly paced the room.”
        2. Reduce telling by showing, or delete it entirely.
        3. But telling has a purpose. Use telling to pass time to get to the next action… e.g. skip to a scene three weeks later when the next important revelation happens.
     7. Describe all five senses characters are experiencing to pull down on pyramid.
        1. Of all the senses, taste is hard. Don’t let your characters lick things.

1. Business
   1. Be a complete artist when writing. Do not think about marketing when you're writing. Write something you're passionate about.
   2. But when you're done, take the artist who wrote it, lock them in a closet, and try to exploit their work in any possible manner.
      1. Every book will have little red marks against it in the minds of readers. e.g. too long/too short
      2. Your job is not to get rid of all the red marks
      3. Write what you want, but realize you may be going upstream.
   3. First book needs about 100k words with killer ending
      1. Write stand alone first book with sequel potential.
      2. First novel may be bad.
      3. Can't get hung up on first book.
   4. Get your writing critiqued.
      1. Critique groups:
         1. When offering criticism, don't prescribe, describe. How did the book make you feel? Offer your reaction as a reader, not your solutions
         2. When hearing criticism: don't defend. Just listen. But don't let everyone’s input dictate your book.  Use them as a test audience for how you can best achieve the reaction you want. Keep your vision intact.
         3. No book is for everyone - not everyone's creative judgment will be in harmony with your writing. If you are in harmony with your critique group’s creative judgment, they can be invaluable to you. If not, they are poison. (Mull)
      2. College writing classes:
         1. Consist mostly of critiquing classic books/each other’s writing
         2. Most do not teach how to critique. That’s what Brandon does.
   5. Self-publishing:
      1. E-books made self-publishing an overnight success into a valid route for authors.  30-40% of e-books sold on Amazon are indie.
      2. Indie is controlled by Amazon.
      3. Control the Cover, Price, Distribution.
      4. Make 70% of cover.
      5. Need to price it $2.99-9.99 to get 70%, or else you get 35%.
      6. Almost no printed self books make money.
      7. Not enough of a support structure to know how good your books are getting.
      8. What works in self publishing:
         1. Shorter, faster paced books
         2. Things that are not being produced by big 5 publishers
      9. Base direction on a couple of factors:
      10. How fast do I write? If you write only one book every 3-4 years, self publishing is probably a bad match for you.
      11. If you do write fast… ask what are your interests?
      12. Do whatever will make money.
   6. Traditional publishing:
      1. They do the work you don't want to do.
      2. Terminology:
         1. Advance: Amount they will pay you in advance. 5k is average for first time authors.
            1. Advance is against royalties.
            2. You don't have to pay back advance unless you fail to turn in the book.
         2. P&L: profit and loss. Editors estimate how much profit/loss for book to determine advance.
         3. Cover: how much money you get from each book sale.
            1. Once you earn out your advance, you will start getting a cover from sales.
            2. Cover is usually between 6-15% of price of book.
            3. You get your full cover even if it’s discounted (on sale).
         4. Breakpoint: a point at which you begin earning a higher cover if your book sells past a certain number.
            1. Hardcovers are usually 10% for first 5000, 12.5% for next 5000, 15% thereafter.
         5. Returns: Bookstores return books that don't sell to publisher for credit.
         6. Sell through: all the copies of a book that were printed have been sold.
      3. The bigger a book gets, the less a publisher makes off of it. Printing, editing costs are double, but people don't pay more for longer books.
   7. Hybrid authors do both self and trad publishing.
      1. Try both… write a quick pulp novel for self publishing, then write an epic to send to publishers.  If that never gets accepted, self publish that, too.
   8. Small press is a way to have good things of both.
   9. Book tours
      1. Even beginning authors do this in groups, sharing tours with other, preferably more well-known authors.
      2. Share vehicle/motel rooms.
      3. Meet store managers, employees and get them to read your book and recommend it.
      4. If not many come to book signings, sign copies and leave them in the shelf.
      5. Build mailing list.
      6. Ask for free copies of book from publisher. Give out free copies of books to store employees if they promise to read it. Do this in every bookstore in every city you visit.
   10. Actual marketing
       1. Don't expect publisher to do much.
       2. Marketing is expensive and hard.
       3. You may get some targeted ads.
       4. Coop ads: Front page of Amazon, front bookshelves/endcaps in Barnes and Noble is all paid advertising called coop.
          1. Not paid for directly, but store gets higher cut of sales for these books.
       5. You can maybe get some bookmarks/postcards printed by publisher.
   11. Publicity:
       1. If it costs money, it's marketing. If it doesn't cost money, it’s publicity.
       2. The publicist's job is to arrange:
          1. Interviews
          2. Social media Q&As
          3. Book signings, tours
       3. Publicist may not offer much to beginning authors, but are open to your ideas.
       4. Get on NPR, or any local public station. People who read listen to NPR.
       5. Blog tours
          1. Blog tours don't cost money for gas, airplanes, motels
          2. Just costs time to write for blogs that write about novels. Doesn't need to be directly about your book, but you can mention it/link to ebook
   12. Agents
       1. Depictions of agents in film are Hollywood agents. Book agents are in New York, in a much different culture.
       2. New Yorkers are terse, blunt, and upfront.  But not slimy.
       3. Threefold job:
          1. Sell your book
          2. Negotiate
          3. Advise
       4. They spend a lot of time going to lunch with editors, then find books to match what editors are looking for.
       5. They get the money, usually take 15%, then send the rest to you
          1. It's convenient to get one check and one 1099 form from your agent, instead of dealing with all checks from all publishers.
          2. Handle subsidiaries, e.g. movie deals, audiobooks.
          3. Handle overseas business.
          4. But some authors think no one else should handle your money but you.
       6. Ideally:
          1. If an agent likes your submission, they send it to contacts in New York.  Hopefully to about twelve of them.
          2. These publishers read it and say if they're interested or not.
          3. Counsels you on which deal to take, but it's ultimately up to you.
          4. Agent negotiates to get more advance/cover/rights
       7. Bidding war
          1. Agent submits book to ten-fifteen publishers.
          2. More than one publisher wants it.
          3. Publishers make bid, agent chooses highest.
          4. Results in higher pay for authors, and publisher needs to spend a lot on marketing to recoup the cost.
          5. This is uncommon.
       8. Career/book advice
          1. Agents vary widely in this
          2. Agents might keep asking for revisions. You can't let it go on forever.
          3. Always try out most of their suggestions, but stick with your ultimate decisions.
       9. Agent works for you. You are in charge.
          1. Always be submitting to multiple agents.
          2. You should always be pushing agent to sell to numerous publishers. You want options. You want a bidding war.
          3. You should always see rejection letters yourself, not just agent.
          4. There is no governing body over agents. No credentials. But most good ones live in New York.
          5. Research agents before sending books to them. Make sure you can find books from these agents on store shelves.
          6. Make sure they have made sales with new authors in the past couple of years.
          7. Only work with a new agent if:
             1. Agent is with an agency, usually under apprenticeship program.
             2. Was formerly an editor.
   13. Some choose IP agent. IP agents only negotiate. Do not sell or advise.
       1. Not many big names do this, although some are their own agent.
   14. Brandon’s first deal was $10,000 advance. Agent negotiated it up from $5,000. It was $5k on signing, $5k on completion. First year was $5k for income.
   15. Contracts
       1. Agents should be arguing for a higher advance. Negotiating up to double the offer is frequent.
       2. To get it higher you need an auction/bidding war between publishers.
       3. Argue for higher royalties. But royalties are more set. e.g. Joshua (Brandon's agent) has negotiated from 6% to 8% on paperbacks.
       4. Subsidiary rights
          1. Lots of wiggle room. Publishers often try to take all rights. Agents will argue to give publisher only foreign language and American English.
          2. World English is rights to release English version in any country.
          3. Publishers usually are willing to strike out rights.
          4. Foreign deals are important for an author’s income.
          5. Audiobooks:
             1. Controlled almost exclusively by Audible.
             2. Pretty good money for authors.
       5. Sometimes publishers try to sneak in non-compete clauses, which make it so you can't write books for anyone else. No agent will tolerate this.
       6. But agents do allow a right of first refusal.  The publisher will get to see the next book, especially the next book in that series or genre. This means you can shop around for a higher bid, but you must give that publisher the chance to match the highest bid.
   16. If you want to sell your book yourself:
       1. Make a list of publishers that publish books like yours, and all the names of editors
       2. Find them in Google. Find them in books in acknowledgements page. Find out who works at the publisher.
       3. Find out reputation of these editors.
       4. Talk to authors at conventions.
       5. Address submission to editor by name, or you have no idea which editor will get it.
       6. Lots of editors at the same publisher will have widely different opinions.
       7. Publishing isn't an old boys club, mostly because most editors are women.
       8. Write an editor by name and begin by saying specifically why your book is similar to other things they have published, and why this editor in particular will like such and such about your book.
       9. In a pitch or query letter, they are only looking for two things: (Mull)
          1. Does this fit into an existing category?  Which means, is there an audience for it?
          2. Is it different than everything else in that category in a cool way?
          3. If yes and yes, you will get a request to see the manuscript.
       10. When meeting editors/agents, they’ll be more inclined to talk about what THEY are working on right now. Find one that is working on something similar to your book.
   17. Genres (Mull)
       1. Middle grade: 12-14 (Mull)
          1. Crushes, but not sexuality.
          2. Action, but not violence.
       2. Young adult: teenage minds (Mull)
          1. Discovering sexuality, not savvy.
          2. Pretty broad limit.
          3. Can swear, or not.
          4. Teen books are shorter, so it's much easier to write a bad one.
          5. Teen is more corporate.
       3. Biggest difference
          1. Middle grade: someone buys books for them
          2. YA: buy books for themselves
   18. Publishers:
       1. Sci-fi fantasy publishers
          1. Had a grassroots start.
          2. Publishers were started by fans.
          3. Have a chaotic approach.
          4. Tor
             1. The biggest sci-fi/fantasy publisher.
             2. Especially chaotic.
             3. There is no adult supervision.
             4. Wide variety. Tor does everything.
             5. Accepts unsolicited submissions.
             6. Need to get into hands of editor that will like your book.
             7. Learn editors’ names but don't stalk anyone.
             8. Read their blogs.
             9. Go to their presentations at conventions.
          5. Baen is very similar to Tor.
             1. Largest independent sci fi fantasy publisher.
             2. Bane wanted books that are "fun."
             3. Lots of fast paced, military, etc.
             4. Updated, classic sci-fi.
             5. Smaller advances.
             6. Go to hardcover less frequently.
       2. Big Five Publishers:
          1. Random/Penguin
             1. Gobbled up lots of publishers

Separate editorial groups

If one rejects your book, harder to get it in to another one.

* + - * 1. Ace, Roc: good sci-fi/fantasy imprints.
        2. DAW

weird relationship – half-owned by Penguin

Few books, but put lots behind them

Favor epic fantasy and sci fi with female protagonists

Authors treated very well

* + - * 1. Del Rey/Bantom

Corporate

Best seller lines

Still interested in new authors, but usually need agent

* + - 1. Harper
         1. Voyager imprint
         2. Friendly
         3. A lot of urban fantasy
      2. Simon & Schuester
         1. Saga imprint
         2. Fairly new
         3. Hunting epic fantasy
      3. Warner Media
      4. Hachette
         1. Orbit imprint
         2. UK-based. Biggest publisher of fantasy/sci-fi outside the US
         3. Organized, easy to get a hold of people
    1. There are a few good smaller publishers:
       1. Tachyon
       2. Pure
       3. But if you go smaller than these, you might as well be self-publishing.
  1. Conventions
     1. Three types (ComicCon, Conferences, and Cons)
        1. ComicCon is fun, but worst place to meet editors.
        2. Conference
           1. Has high ticket price.
           2. Workshops and pitch sessions.
           3. In teen/YA, conferences are important to meet editors.
        3. Cons
           1. grassroots, sci-fi/fantasy, fan-run, not for profit, nerd extravaganzas.
           2. Smaller.
           3. Editors are coming to have fun, but still a good place to meet editors, if you’re not annoying.
           4. World Con or World Fantasy Con are largest.
           5. World Con: has cool presentation to show what's new from publishers. And panels with agents and editors, which are goldmines of information.
     2. Pitch sessions at conferences. You need:
        1. A verbal pitch:
           1. One sentence pitch (usually two sentences put together with semi colons).
           2. If they say, “Tell me more,” give longer summary – two or three paragraphs.
           3. Focus on characters and conflict, not plot points or magic system.
        2. Practice these in front of friends.
        3. If agent/editor is interested, they may request sample chapters. If still interested, will request whole manuscript.
        4. Don't need an agent if you meet an editor directly… unless they ask for one. If you don’t have an agent, tell editor, “Great, I’ll get back to you in a couple days.” Then write to agents saying an editor is interested. Agents will be eager to represent you.
  2. Any publisher will take any manuscript that's great.
  3. Always a good sign when publishers say they’re doing something new/changing.
  4. It's a good sign when you start getting personalized rejections with specific criticisms.
     1. The editor is telling you you're a good writer, and maybe will be interested in your next book.
     2. This is when you become semi-pro.
     3. Editors became editors because they want to help writers improve.
  5. Self doubt never goes away. It's part of being an artist.
  6. Friends can help with feedback.
  7. Spend at least an hour a day reading other books.
     1. Read widely in a lot of different genres, but focus on what makes you excited to read.
  8. Why write?
     1. People pretend the chances are one in a million of becoming a professional, full-time author. Chances are more like 1:4.
        1. After about ten years of writing, you'll have about a 25% chance of becoming a full time writer.
        2. Doing the things in this class will improve your odds.
     2. People assume that playing basketball doesn't mean you intend to go pro, but everyone assumes that if you write a book, you want to be published. But you don't need to.
     3. Writing should feel like something you’re built to do.
     4. Is it worth putting all the effort into it? Are you willing to do it even if it ends up being no more than a hobby?
     5. If you are discouraged, reconsider why you're doing it.
     6. You should write because you enjoy writing.