

William Hill Author Visit: A Discussion on Writing

William Hill, a brief history.

Note: I cover this because I want the students to understand that a real person writes books. I was a kid, much like them. Therefore, it's entirely possible that they can be good writers, too.

Prior to school, I started drawing my own Justice League comic books. Since it was before I could read my mom wrote in the narrative and dialog. As much as I loved comic books, I wasn't learning to read, mostly because I was reluctant. Reading was hard, like learning an entirely new language! I was forced to go to a special reading teacher in 1st grade, Mrs. Rush.

I read hundreds of comic books but only a few books. I didn't really get infected by the reading bug until 7th grade, when I read the Star Trek novels based on the original television series. After that, a pre-Superman superhero called Doc Savage, a pulp hero from the 1920's, hooked my attention for a series. I was also fascinated by A Wrinkle In Time. SF won a Newberry Award. Wow! Prior to that, only Jules Verne and HG Wells were considered acceptable for reading credit in schools.

I wrote my first novella on a manual typewriter for a spring 7th grade English assignment. By using friends as characters in the story, several of them started writing, too.

I went from reading Science Fiction to secret agent/super spy thrillers. I was already a big James Bond fan. In 9th grade, on an electric typewriter I wrote a spy thriller for English class. As much fun as it was, it was too much work rewriting and retyping.

In high school, I got very involved in sports and spent more time drawing than writing. I also worked after school. Star Wars was released my junior year and that convinced me that what I had seen in my imagination could be brought to the big screen. My senior year, I was captivated by Dune and The Lord of the Rings trilogy. My reading taste was shifting to fantasy.

When I graduated high school, I chose a liberal arts college in Nashville, TN. At Vanderbilt I took lots of different classes to find out what I liked. Despite taking arts and writing classes, I graduated with a degree in Economics and Business Administration with a minor in Philosophy. Philosophy classes have served me the best in my writing because philosophers debate questions that are good material for story themes. Another good class was Religions of the World. English teachers, though, seemed to bleed all over my papers with red ink. Even so, my writing professor said my writing 'would never classify as literature, but that I might have a future in the paperback trade, if I learned more about the English language.'

Also while I was at college, I learned to play Dungeon and Dragons. This is pre-video and computer games. As the dungeon master I gained helpful experience creating my own world and plotting out adventures. I read two series that have influenced my writing: The Elric series by Micheal Moorcock and the Amber series by Roger Zelazney.

Being practical, I went to graduate school at the University of North Texas and earned my MBA. I worked an internship and got a corporate job in Human Resource administration for a telecommunications company. I learned a lot about people I would have preferred not to know and a little about computers. I really enjoyed editing and writing for the company newsletter and newspaper for both Nortel and Vistawall.

While working my second corporate job, I house sat for a friend's family. The place was on a lake. It didn't have a telephone nor TV reception. I had just read the popular Dragonlance series and thought, hey, I can do that. Little did I know. Feeling the irresistible need to try, I purchased my first computer in February of 1987. It was an Amstrad with an 8 inch green screen. Working full time and commuting an hour each way, it took 2 years to write An Amok Fantasy. Writers, especially in the beginning, need lots of unbroken time to create, edit and rewrite. I found that at the quiet lake, where I lived alone and had few temptations. Dipping into the river of writing for the first time each day is always the most difficult. Getting into the flow can be frustrating. With less distractions, you stick it out. I've learned not to have games or e-mail on my computer.

An Amok Fantasy didn't sell by sending it to publishers. I don't think I ever got out of the slush pile.

But I had a fortuitous encounter. At a friend's wedding, I meet an editor at St. Martin's Press. I boldly made my pitch. He offered to read it. He said his new job at Pinnacle didn't publish fantasy,

but that my writing was okay. I choose horror immediately, recalling my Dark Shadows days, and pitched vampires surviving in the sunlight. I made another bold move. I quit my job, moved to Tahoe and wrote like crazy, getting half done in four months while bartending. Dawn of the Vampire was published with a fantastic cover in 1991. Amazingly enough, it's still in print, its 7th.

I've learned since that the best way to meet editors is by going to conventions and places where they avail themselves to the public. They are more open to ideas and pitches, and by getting to meet them personally, you are more likely to get read. Your work becomes solicited. That doesn't mean they buy your work, though. Editors are like people and buy what they like to read.

In 1994, Vampire's Kiss was published with an awful cover. Despite this, the book sold out in 2 months but was not reprinted. We agreed to end the contract for a third book.

I thought I could find another publisher, but I didn't. I worked ski patrol during winters, which allowed me to write during slow days. I rewrote Danny's Magic Bicycle while writing Ghostal Shores. I became more interested in young adult fiction, having read The Phantom Tollbooth and The Dark is Rising. Four years later, after several near misses with The Magic Bicycle, my family decided to form a publishing company and publish The Magic Bicycle, California Ghosting, and The Vampire Hunters, as well as another novels.

In 1999, we published a sequel to the popular The Magic Bicycle, titled Chasing Time.

In 2001, our books were put on the AR (Accelerated Readers) List. We published An Amok Fantasy, revised, as Wizard Sword. We had fun with fonts using them for the different monsters' dialog, which some people loved and some hated.

Over the next several years, I worked on three manuscripts and raising my son. I read two excellent books on writing. Orson Scott Card's Writing Science Fiction and Fantasy and Wells Root's Writing the Script, about screenplays.

In 2005, Dragon Pawns: Jules and the Runt Dragon is released, with some of my artwork inside. Two other vampire novels are due out in fall and winter.

My desires in writing are to have fun, and create a bit of magic, taking imagination and giving it shape in the form of a book. My goals are to create stories that entertain, inspire and provoke thought, as well as being read more than once.

With that in mind, I would like to hear some of your favorite novels and why you love them.

A Discussion About Writing and Getting Started

Note: I use a white board to help talk about writing. As the students mention the whys, I pull out those parts and mark them on the board. If that doesn't get enough info, I ask what's necessary for a good story, one you would like to read or watch again and again.

The aspects are:

Interesting/Memorable/Relatable Characters

Conflict- Tension and suspense

Compelling themes

Interesting settings

Viewpoint/Voice

Pace

Plot

Mystery

Humor

Note: I make mention of the following points along the way, as appropriate.

On characters:

According to Gary Trudeau (Doonesbury), a writer's job is to create memorable characters and put them under duress or in peril. How do we create memorable characters?

Make them relatable to your reading audience/target market. Do this through shared universal feelings and experiences. With luck, your character will remind them of themselves or somebody they know. We also want to know why our main characters are the central protagonists. Why did they get the part?

On conflict:

Why put characters under stress or duress?

Often, more exciting is the answer. Example: you are changing classes, and there is a loud argument between students. It is hard to ignore. The other answer is to test the mettle of the characters. The decisions made reveal the essence of the characters and tell us what they are really like.

Example of inner conflict and increasing tension. A student goes to a store with a friend who steals. What does the main character do? You can increase tension by: peer pressure to also steal, the friend has already been caught once-another trip sends them to jail-and lastly, the store is owned by family and is in financial difficulties. If the store goes bankrupt, the character will have to move.

On theme:

What is a theme? The main idea of the story. The moral of the story.

Why do we need it?

It is part of the question to answer. The issue to be resolved or stated.

Sometimes you start with a theme in mind. Other times, it appears.

On settings:

It should be appropriate to the character involved or related to the theme or event. Authors usually use settings they know or places they've been.

On viewpoint:

This is seeing through the eyes of the characters and flavoring what they see based on their beliefs and experiences. If more than one is used, make sure the viewpoints are different, like in X-Files with a believer and a disbeliever. Or a male and a female. Or a hero and villain. Voice makes them sound different.

On pace:

It is the speed and flow of the story. We want to vary the tension and give our readers time to rest and come to realizations in the story, just before the character. We don't want them holding on by the tips of the fingers the entire time. Besides, there should be safe moments so we can shatter the tranquility.

On plot:

It is the result of the characters' decisions, actions and reactions to situations that bring about the resolution of the theme or reveal character. In some ways, the plot is the test for the characters.

We take all this, and we mix them up to create a story. It helps to keep some of these things in mind while combining those ingredients.

In screenplays, theater and most books there are three parts.

Introduction, Body and Resolution.

What's introduced in the first act? The characters, setting, theme, problem/challenge and perhaps a deadline.

What shows up in the body? More obstacles. Complicating the challenge. Failures to resolve the problem.

Resolution: success or failure of the character, end to the problem, perhaps a change in character.

In its most simple form, during the first act you introduce your character and get them stuck in a tree, chased there by a lion. The problem is to get safely out of the tree.

In the second act, the middle, the body, you increase the hazards and perils. Bad weather. Failed attempts to distract the lion. No food. And worse, an enemy who slings rocks with great aim at you from another tree.

In the final act, your character escapes or gets eaten.

Note: Based on time, offer a second, more detailed example using a river and a hero and heroine who steer a raft downstream to bring medicine to sick people.

Where to begin and end a story? What type of story we want to tell dictates where to begin and end.

I use Orson Scott Card's MICE quotient. M for Milieu. I for Idea. C for Character. And E for Event. All stories fall into these categories. Based upon the category we know where to start and where to stop.

Easier to talk about movies. Ask for examples per category. Or name a movie and slot it.

Milieu: In French it means environment or setting. The different culture is the reason for the story and its focus. Examples: Gulliver's Travels. The Wizard of Oz. Dances with Wolves. Shangri-La. Begins with arrival at the alien land and ends with the character's departure or change.

Idea: The learning about new information is the story, like in murder mysteries. There's a body. Discovery of clues. Puzzling out the pieces. Catching the murderer. Examples: 2001: A Space Odyssey. Men In Black. The tale begins with a problem that requires information to solve and ends with it solved or unsolvable.

Character: All stories need memorable, identifiable, and relatable characters to make the story work, but for it to be a character story, it must begin with them making a decision, or being exposed to a life-changing event. The story is the results and consequences. Examples: The movie: Spiderman. Sinbad. The Incredibles.

Event : The story surrounds a momentous happening. It begins with the starting of the event, say a war or disaster and ends with its finish. Examples: War of the Worlds. Star Wars. Lord of the Rings.

Note: Two exercises depending on time, interest, and questions.

One:

With me leading, students create the ingredients they need to write a story. Use the school or the surrounding area as the setting. Kids at school are the characters. But why those particular students? Look at strengths and weaknesses. Pick a genre. A target market. Ask for Ideas. Pick a theme. Which of the MICE stories does it fit? Come up with three parts of the story and conflicts to test the mettle of the characters. End strong with theme.

Two:

Go through my thinking while developing Dragon Pawns: Jules and the Runt Dragon.

Genre: Fantasy and why, based on what I like to write, the market, and readers. My choice was partly due to the success of the Harry Potter creating lots of fantasy readers. Also the success of Eragon.

Target Market audience: young adult. I like the themes available for that age. Go from youth to learning about the adult world and how it works.

Idea: If wizards are trained at a university, where are their pets and animal companions (familiar) trained?

This led to a setting. Lake Tahoe, a place I know well and lived for ten years. I came up with the idea of an island academy from a bird sanctuary on Pyramid Lake north of Reno.

The original main character was a lazy, runt dragon. This was to be his story, a literal offspring of Durgie in Wizard Sword. Everything is too big and too difficult, modeled after my son when he was little. These are universal feelings that even adults have. To set up some humor, I made the character accident prone. To create mystery and tension I would have him hide his true nature. After more thought, I figured I needed a human main character because some people can't relate to animals. I wanted to expand my audience. Also, since the dragon is male, I chose a female protagonist. Why? To increase my audience and have two viewpoints and voice. I created Jules, modeling her temper after one of my sisters when she was younger. Bad tempers are also universal. I increased Jules' frustration by making her afraid of heights and flying. I decided to make her an unwanted attendee and a failure like Lance so they could relate to each other and share the misery. Both fail and get relegated to the island, where they have to make the best of the situation, although they rather be somewhere else. This was inspired by a visit to a youth detention camp called China Springs in Nevada.

Theme: There are three: With friends and help we can overcome any obstacle, even ourselves. We can make the best of unwanted changes and create new opportunities. Impatience and hot tempers have unpleasant consequences and that we must control these instincts to improve our lives.

Conflict: Both characters start out unhappy. Because Lance is accident prone, Jules doesn't like him at first. She believes he might be the Mad Prankster.

Editing Tips:

Do something else between proof-readings. Re-read many times.

Look at word choice. Specific. Interesting. For example: run, jog, skip, sprint

Change sentence length and pattern.

If stuck, back track.

Move throughout story when working, not just linearly from beginning to end.