

# StoryWorld

By [Randy Ingermanson](#)

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*note: This special report was compiled with permission from several issues of Randy Ingermanson's terrific "Advanced Fiction Writing" e-zine. And feel free to pass this report along to your friends.*

## About The Author:

Award-winning novelist Randy Ingermanson, "the Snowflake Guy," publishes the Advanced Fiction Writing E-zine, with more than 6000 readers, every month. If you want to learn the craft and marketing of fiction, AND make your writing more valuable to editors, AND have FUN doing it, visit

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# The Importance of StoryWorld

**A**re you a Harry Potter fan? Did you join the zillions of zealots who waited till midnight to get Book 7 in the series?

I was on a cruise when the book came out, but the first thing I did when I got off the boat was to head for the store and grab my copy. Copies, actually -- one for me, two for my kids.

Why? What captivated me with this series? What compelled millions of other fans to stand in long lines to get their books? What makes the Harry Potter books work?

After all, if you look around on the web, you'll find all sorts of Muggle-headed critics who claim that J.K. Rowling's style is "clunky" and that she uses (gasp) adverbs too much.

And yet there's something magical about this series. I'm a huge fan of Harry and Ron and Hermione and Neville and Luna and Ginny.

What makes Harry Potter fly?

Is it humor? That's part of it, no doubt. The books have plenty of comic moments. The day Fred and George left Hogwarts will live forever. But I've read a fair number of books that are funnier. Humor isn't the magic secret of these books.

Is it magic? That's part of it, too, I'm sure. Although all but the dullest

readers have got to realize that the magic doesn't actually work. If you've ever absent-mindedly muttered "wingardium leviosa" at the saltshaker while reading a Potter book over a long lunch, you know darn well that saying the words doesn't do a blasted thing.

Is it the extended backstory of all the characters? The endlessly complicated plots? The clever misdirection of the reader's attention? Yes, all of those add to the story. But if you want deep characters, dive into Dostoevsky. If you want complicated plots, grab a Grisham. If you want misdirection, look into LeCarre.

My opinion is that what makes the Potter books work so well is that the StoryWorld is so carefully imagined and well-presented. An enormous amount of thought has gone into how the magical world works. (Not HOW the magic works, but what rules restrict the magic so that not everything is possible.) Because the problem with magic stories where everything is possible is that there isn't any conflict. Conflict requires obstacles, and obstacles don't exist when you can do anything you want by using the right spell.

You can't Apparate into Hogwarts. You can't conjure up food. You can't block one of the Unforgiveable Curses. You can cast a spell at your enemy with your wand, but it may miss, sometimes by just a whisker. The Mirror of Erised shows you what you want most deeply, but it can be limited to show you only things that you will not use. You can wear an Invisibility cloak, but some wizards can see through it. You can be cured of horrific injuries, but if you die, there is no returning.

Readers of the Potter books know dozens or hundreds of such rules. The rules aren't necessarily logical -- at least not to Muggles. But the rules govern the reality of Harry's world, and some of the rules can override other rules.

All of these rules are shown in action or explained in dialogue. Together, they make a world of magic, but a world in which it simply isn't true that "anything is possible."

That, I think, is the magic of these books. It's a world with just as many rules and constraints as our world -- but they're different rules and constraints. And they all make sense, somehow, some way.

When you open a Harry Potter book, you're in a different world. It's a magical world, but a world with real challenges, real trouble, real evil. It's a world with a backstory of its own. The StoryWorld of this series is virtually a character in its own right.

I'm reminded of another series that created its own StoryWorld supremely well -- The Lord of the Rings. LOTR has even more backstory than the Potter books, and it has a more complex geography, but it has less magic and the rules governing the magic are less clear. But Middle Earth is a major character in LOTR, maybe even the most important character.

In both books, the reader is sucked into a complex StoryWorld that feels utterly different than our own world, and yet strangely familiar.

StoryWorld is immensely important in writing a novel. This is especially true in the fantasy genre, but it's also true for historical fiction, westerns, and science fiction. Most other genres can be improved by creating

a strong StoryWorld.

Over the next few months, I'll be examining StoryWorld in depth in a series of articles.

# A House-of-Cards StoryWorld

**L**ast month, I talked about the importance of StoryWorld for writing fiction, and I gave as an example the Harry Potter series. Creating a StoryWorld is extremely important in writing fantasy, science fiction, or historical fiction.

But what if you don't write any of those? What if you just write plain old ordinary fiction?

Well, that's the question, isn't it? Do you want to write plain old ordinary fiction? Or do you want to write extraordinary fiction? Extraordinary fiction happens when you create a StoryWorld so real that your readers believe they've been there.

Over the weekend, I read MR. LUCKY, the latest gritty mystery by magician/author James Swain. I don't read many mysteries (suspense is more down my alley than mystery) but I buy everything James Swain writes.

Why?

Because of the StoryWorld Swain creates.

James Swain writes novels about the gambling world. These aren't just any novels about gambling, though. They're about CHEATERS in the gambling world. Swain's lead character, Tony Valentine, runs a consulting business that catches cheaters. That's a great angle, because everybody loves

a good con story.

Swain knows what he's talking about. He's a magician who's spent years studying crossroaders, grifters, and scammers to learn a zillion different ways to cheat at gambling. His insider knowledge helps him create an awesome StoryWorld.

When you read one of Swain's books, you feel like you're wallowing in the muck of Las Vegas (or Atlantic City or whichever sleazo cheezo casino sets the stage for the story). When you finish reading, you want to take a shower, preferably with a firehose. You feel like you've been there -- and survived.

That's part of why we read gritty fiction (for those of us who read it). To vicariously visit a place that we really wouldn't want to go in reality. To imagine doing crazy stuff that would be foolish, frightening, or fatal in reality. To live life at its wallowing worst.

In Robert McKee's famous book on screenwriting, *STORY*, he makes the rather startling claim that all cliches in writing are due to a failure to do research. McKee argues that when you show your characters eating or shopping or working or goofing off or doing anything else, you'll fall back on cliches -- the dreary average of every novel you've ever read or movie you've ever watched. Unless you've done your research. When you've done your homework, you'll know those surprising details that bring your StoryWorld to life.

If you're Tom Clancy writing *PATRIOT GAMES*, you'll know, for example, that the folks who sell food at the concession stands inside CIA

headquarters are blind.

If you're John Grisham writing *THE FIRM*, you'll know that most lawyers hate research.

And if you're James Swain writing *DEAD MAN'S POKER*, you'll know that a con man can win a bet on which sugar cube a fly is going to land on just by ... oops! Sorry, I'm not going to give that one away. You'll have to read the book to find out.

See, that's what I like about James Swain's books. I love a good con story. Maybe I have a personality defect, but I like them a lot. Swain's books are full of cons, from simple little sucker bets all the way up to full scale high-tech scams that rip off casinos for millions of dollars.

Many of them are real scams, used by hustlers around the world to separate bucks from marks. Swain didn't make these up. He researched them the hard way -- by talking to hustlers and watching them work.

Some examples will show what I'm talking about.

In *DEADMAN'S POKER*, a seventy two year old man bets a group of gamblers half a million dollars that he can beat a racehorse in a footrace over 100 yards. How much would you bet against him?

In *SUCKER BET*, a blackjack dealer is winning big. He's not stacking the deck, not false shuffling, not dealing seconds, and not marking the cards. Would you play at his table?

In *LOADED DICE*, two women are playing roulette. One of them keeps trying to place her bets after the ball drops, but the dealer won't let

her. The other woman is raking in money like there's no tomorrow. Which one would you arrest?

These are simple, ordinary scams, and Swain's books are full of them, with numerous examples in every book. Generally, the storyline hinges on solving some far more complex and outrageously brilliant con -- a ripoff scheme that turns on the little details that only a gambling insider would know.

A few examples:

In MR. LUCKY, a gambler goes on a hot streak at the blackjack table and wins EVERY hand he plays. Statistically, that isn't possible, and yet it's happening. He isn't marking the cards or even touching them. He isn't a card counter. He's just changing the number of hands he plays on every round. Is he cheating, or is he just ... lucky?

In DEADMAN'S BLUFF, a blind man is leading a major poker tournament in Las Vegas. He's smashing the competition, and some of the other disgruntled players think he's cheating. Is he or isn't he?

In GRIFT SENSE, a player is taking a casino to the cleaners night after night, and flaunting his success. Which is the exact opposite of what a cheater should be doing. Cheaters want to keep winning, which means not letting the casino know it's losing. Why is this guy different?

Reading James Swain's books, you get the feeling he's been in every casino in Vegas and Atlantic City a zillion times, that he's seen every crummy gambling joint in the country, watched every scam, knows every possible trick. It's an illusion of course, because nobody could know

everything, but it feels like Swain does.

Building a realistic StoryWorld isn't just about getting the geography right. It's about getting the language and the mindset right. It's about insider knowledge. It's about those surprising little details that most people wouldn't guess, because they're counterintuitive.

No matter what kind of novel you write, your StoryWorld will be ever so much stronger if you bring insider knowledge to the table. Whether you're making the world safe for muggles ... or saving sleazy casino owners from the greed of those greasy grifters.

Interested in reading some of James Swain's books? Here are a couple of Amazon links. (I give these books an R rating on several counts apiece, so if that's an issue for you, you have been warned.)

GRIFT SENSE (first in the series):

<http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com/blinks/griftsense.php>

MR. LUCKY (latest in the series):

<http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com/blinks/mrlucky.php>

Have fun!

# Treating Your StoryWorld Like a Character

**W**ho's the main character in THE LORD OF THE RINGS? Frodo? Gandalf? Aragorn?

For a long time, I've thought that the answer to that question is "Middle Earth." The StoryWorld itself is the main character, and the War of the Ring is only one chapter in Middle Earth's long story.

In the Harry Potter series, no doubt the main character is the intrepid boy wizard, Harry. But one of the critical characters in the story has to be Hogwarts, with its staircases that move on their own, paintings of people who won't stay still, and that remarkable Room of Requirement that provides you whatever you need.

In RIVER GOD, a historical novel set in 18th century BC Egypt, the narrator Taita tells a tale of love and suspense against a backdrop of change -- the arrival in Egypt of the Hyksos conquerors. Numerous characters cross the stage in the novel, but Taita never misses a chance to praise "this very Egypt," the land he loves.

In each of these novels, the StoryWorld itself is a character. Like any good character, the StoryWorld needs to be developed by you, the author. The question is how to do that.

Of course you can leave it to chance, but why should you? Why not be proactive in creating your StoryWorld? What if you pretended that your StoryWorld were just another character? What if you worked through the process of character creation for your StoryWorld? Would that help or hurt?

Let's pretend for a moment that it would help. How would you go about it?

There are many ways of creating characters, but I like the process outlined in James N. Frey's series of how-to books, beginning with HOW TO WRITE A DAMN GOOD NOVEL. Frey didn't invent this process, but he makes an extremely good case for using it.

We've been discussing these ideas lately on my Advanced Fiction Writing Blog. If you missed them, check out the late September entries at: <http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com/blog>

In this process, a character has three important attributes: \*  
"Physiology" \* "Sociology" \* "Psychology"

"Physiology" for a character is a broad term that covers physical and mental traits, scars, inherited talents, acquired skills, etc.

"Sociology" refers to the environment in which the character is raised, including family relationships, education, politics, religion, and history.

"Psychology" is the way a character responds to his "sociology," given his unique "physiology."

How do these apply to the StoryWorld?

First, a StoryWorld has a "physiology" just as much as any person

does.

A person has a particular body, which may be thin or thick, dark or light, soft or hard, blue-eyed or brown-eyed or green-eyed or differently-eyed.

In just the same way, a StoryWorld has its own peculiar geography. What planet does your StoryWorld take place on? Where on the planet? Is the terrain mountainous or flat, dry or soggy, hot or cold? What flora and fauna infest the place? What kind of weather goes on there? What scars on the land have been inflicted by its inhabitants?

No doubt about it, a StoryWorld has a "physiology."

The second attribute, "sociology," is a little less obvious. Can a StoryWorld have a "sociology?"

Well, yes, of course it can. All you have to do is ask "Who acts on the StoryWorld?" There are many possible answers. For example:

What gods or goddesses inhabit the land? In ancient Egypt, they are Isis and Osiris and Seth and Horus and Hapi and a score of others. In Middle Earth, the Valar shape the destiny of the planet, while Sauron the Great tries to twist it to his own ends. In Harry Potter, magic is real, an impersonal force waiting to be tapped by those with magical ability. Even our ordinary world is guided by the laws of physics.

What other StoryWorlds live outside the boundaries, competing with your StoryWorld? Ancient Egypt lived side by side with Sumer, with Ethiopia, with India. Hogwarts competes with other schools, such as Beauxbatons and Durmstrang. Even if you set your novel in San Francisco,

it still lives in an unruly neighborhood with Richmond, Albany, Berkeley, Oakland, Emeryville, San Leandro, and a dozen others.

What previous StoryWorlds does yours inherit from? Just as people inherit from their parents and grandparents, your StoryWorld inherits from its forebears. Modern Europe inherits from Enlightenment Europe which inherited from Renaissance Europe which inherited from Medieval Europe which inherited from ancient Rome, which inherited from the Greeks and Etruscans, *ad infinitum*.

So a StoryWorld has a "sociology."

What about the third attribute, "psychology?" Can a StoryWorld have a "psychology?"

That seems like a pretty silly question, because in most cases, your StoryWorld is not actually conscious. You can't have much of a "psychology" without being conscious, now can you?

But pretend for a minute that your StoryWorld IS conscious. You're a novelist, so it's easy for you to pretend that impossible things are possible. If your StoryWorld WERE conscious and could have thoughts and feelings about its "physiology" and "sociology," what would it think and feel?

How would ancient Egypt feel about the humans that lived off the bounty of its Nile and built stone monuments and pyramids? Would it love these strange children of the dust, or hate them? Would it mock them or curse them?

What would Middle Earth think of Sauron's bid to bring it under darkness forever? Would it work against him or for him? Isn't it true that

Mount Caradhras kept Gandalf and the fellowship of the Ring from passing?  
Didn't Barad Dur belch smoke and flames as the Dark Lord's power grew?

If your StoryWorld were conscious, what would it do to help or hinder your characters? It's worth thinking about, even if you think your StoryWorld really can't do anything. Because actually it can. Earthquakes, tornadoes, lightning storms, floods -- your StoryWorld can and does act on your characters. The way you write about your StoryWorld's actions can create a powerful mood for your novel.

One way that many authors get in touch with their characters is by interviewing them or asking them to write a journal. You can do the same with your StoryWorld.

An interview is a series of questions and answers. You ask the questions. Then write out the answers that your StoryWorld would give if it were conscious. Don't be surprised if it fibs now and then. Interviewees do that sometimes.

A journal is the written record of someone's inmost, secret, truthful thoughts and feelings. What would your StoryWorld write in its journal if it thought nobody could ever read its secret thoughts? Write them down and see what you learn!

Do you have to do all this hard work? Can't you just write your novel and leave all this weird stuff to the weirdos?

No, you don't have to work hard. Yes, you can just write. You can and should do whatever it takes to write the best novel you can write.

If you think you'll write a better novel by imagining your StoryWorld

as a character, then do so. If not, then don't. It's that simple.

# The End

Remember, for more great writing resources,  
check out [www.StoryHack.com](http://www.StoryHack.com) or  
[Advanced Fiction Writing](#)