

Random Thoughts



Welcome to my autumn newsletter.

The nights are drawing in, heralding the season to curl up with a good book while the rain lashes the windows. The books I've been reading recently have got me thinking about the use of language and how it can subtly influence the personality of a story.

I'm a lover of sumptuously glorious language and am happiest when melting into the prose of Guy Gavriel Kay or Janny Wurts; I have been known to quote a Shakespearian phrase. 😊 But I also have cravings for 'junk food' where the language is more contemporary and easily accessed.

The style used by the author can be a quick way of setting the scene. More formal or archaic language is often used with more immersive, epic fantasy. It typically creates a more chivalric setting without lengthy extrapolation of knights and heraldry. In contrast, a more modern language can provide a shortcut to characters that share contemporary values – less 'damsels in distress'.

My current project has chapters from different character viewpoints, and it has been a lot of fun using language to reflect the different personalities. More formal language can be used for older generations or those with a more comprehensive education, while more relaxed syntax, contractures, etc. can give the impression of youth or 'street smarts'. The project is also a portal-fantasy, so lots to play with regarding the choice of expletives for those from different worlds.

In the spirit of Halloween, or Samhain if we're talking fantasy! 😊 I attended a conference recently highlighting the horror element of speculative fiction, and the overlap between horror and dark fantasy. An interesting etymology – yes, I'm a nerd for the development of language too – was the word haunting. The term comes from haunt, meaning a place where animals come to feed. It is interesting to consider the emotion of the word 'haunting' and how it conjures images of people as prey – be that ghosts, demons or monsters, depending on the genre.



Questions and Answers

What did you underestimate the most when you started writing?

Apart from the time it takes to write the first draft of a novel (for me, it can take up to 2 years to get the story down), the thing I had not factored in was the time needed for editing and the different forms it takes. I had assumed editing to essentially be proofreading and, while this is incredibly important, this is done last, just before printing.

Copy or line editing is completed prior to proofreading and typically focuses on language! As discussed earlier, the use of appropriate language can make or break the flow of the narrative. This checks whether the text is clear, concise, makes sense, and the appropriate word or phrase is used. For example, the use of an overtly modern term within archaic prose can throw the reader out of the story, and vice versa with an unnecessarily verbose phrase in a fast-paced, modern prose.

Before all that is the developmental edit or manuscript critique. An author will typically become too close to their story and it can be immensely helpful to have another pair of eyes take a look. Common areas highlighted include whether the story makes sense and is clear, whether it comes to a satisfactory conclusion, and is there consistency of spelling (especially names, which I change on a regular basis!). With fantasy, the world building and magic systems are particularly important – it can make perfect sense to the author (they created it) yet be completely baffling to everyone else.

In short – editing is really, really important. 😊

Recent Reads

I've used a slightly different aspect of language to influence my recommendations.

Authors tend to lean towards their own gender for the protagonist – it's easiest to write what you know. I have read several female authors who write male main characters (MC), although it is unusual, in my experience, for male authors to write female MC.

Mark Lawrence, in the Red Sister trilogy, not only has a female MC, but his world is primarily populated by females. It is definitely worth a look. Conversely, I have only now got round to reading Manda Scott's Rome quartet, which has a male MC and uses different styles of delivery to look from different character viewpoints. It's always a treat to read Manda – a beautiful language specialist.

That's all for now. Don't forget to follow me on my socials for regular updates – just click on the appropriate image below:

