

March 2012 Q&A: Fiction

This is a transcript of the audio Q&A, edited slightly for easy reading!

You can find the audio version at www.writershuddle.com/qas/march2012

Hi, I'm Ali Luke, and this is the fiction part of the March Q&A.

Melissa: How Do You Read Like a Writer?

So, the first question is from Melissa, who asked about **reading like a writer -- so not just reading for enjoyment, but taking note of how writers use language and style, how they set scenes, and so on.**

Melissa mentions that she's got a degree in English Literature, so she knows how to analyse books from a critiquing perspective, but not perhaps so much in terms of the enjoyment of the reader and things that you can really apply to your own writing.

This is something which I think is really useful to do if you're a writer: to look at other books -- particularly in your own genre, but to look at good writing in general, and to see how it works, basically, to be able to pull it apart and see what's going on.

This is something which it's useful to do along with other writers. It was something we did on my Master's Degree in Creative Writing as a group, and that was helpful because you got different perspectives, and other people would sometimes see something that you might not have seen in the work, or have a different opinion on it.

I think **it also helps to have a particular question in mind**, so you might want to look at how an author establishes character for instance, if you've got a book where you've got characters who seem very vivid and real, and draw you into their story, then look at how that's done. Or in terms of style and voice, you might want to photocopy part of the book and really go through in detail

and see what word choices are being used, how the characters' different voices come together, and so on. You can look at what word choices and sentence structures create particular effects.

Something that I also find helpful is to consider what doesn't work in a book, because sometimes I pick up a book and just don't get into it, or I do read it and it just doesn't quite come together for me somehow. Maybe the ending's disappointing, or the characters aren't engaging, or the writing is sloppy, or something.

This can be useful because sometimes it's easier to spot what isn't working and to avoid making those same mistakes yourself, rather than to really understand how everything's come together to make a good book.

So I realise that's a slightly negative perspective, but I think **whether you're reading something that you love or you hate or you're just indifferent to, it's good to analyse your own responses a bit,** and to really see what in the writing made you come to that opinion.

This is something I'm thinking we might do a bit more of within the Huddle itself, to perhaps choose a novel and look at it from a writing perspective, or to look at just some excerpts from novels and really see what's going on there.

Emily: Was Lycopolis Planned as a Trilogy?

So, the next question is from Emily, and she asked **whether I always planned for my novel *Lycopolis* to be part of a trilogy, or whether that was something that evolved as I was writing the story.**

This is actually an area where traditional publishing and indie publishing are slightly at odds, because when I started *Lycopolis* in 2008, indie publishing really hadn't taken off in the way it has today. I think in the UK the Kindle wasn't even available at that point, so this was very early in e-readers and ebook becoming mainstream.

Perhaps partly because I was taking an academic course in creative writing, I felt like the way to go was traditional publishing. That felt like the expectation from all the people around me. So, because I was thinking of traditional publishing, I knew that publishers don't generally want a first-time author to come to them with a whole trilogy, or a whole seven book series or something mapped out. They want one book, because then they don't have to take a chance on publishing three books that might not necessarily be successful.

In indie publishing, though, trilogies or series are really the way to go. So, if you look at any really successful indie authors (I'm thinking of people like Amanda Hocking and Joe Konrath) you'll see that they've got series of books, or at least trilogies of books, and that's how they get lots of readers and lots of sales.

To some extent I suppose **it's easier to keep writing with the same characters and the same world**, so to speak, rather than necessarily having to come up with a whole new situation and a whole new set of characters for every novel.

Series also seem to be common with people who are up-and-coming indies, so Joanna Penn, although she's not perhaps as well known as Hocking or Konrath yet, I know she's on the second book of her ARKANE trilogy, and I think her third one's coming out next year.

With *Lycopolis*, I guess I deliberately left room in the plot and the story to have a sequel, or to have a couple of sequels in the case of a trilogy, if I wanted to. **When I made the decision to publish the book independently, that was the point at which I committed to doing a whole trilogy**, so there is the scope within the characters and so on to keep it going.

I guess if you're looking into independent publishing, it's worth keeping in mind that probably the easiest way to be successful is to have a concept and a set of characters that lend themselves to having a series. This is particularly common in areas like crime fiction, which often has characters who go on book after book. It's also common in fantasy, and science fiction, to an extent, to

have trilogies. It is popular with readers, particularly the sorts of readers who become loyal fans, because **if you can give them several books with the same characters, they're looking forward to the next one, they become more and more invested in those people's stories.**

Maybe it's something to consider almost from a marketing viewpoint, maybe from the point at which you're planning your first novel, or starting to work on that seriously.

Emily: Using Fictional vs Real Locations in Contemporary Fiction

So, Emily had another question, which was about **writing fiction that takes place in a real, modern-day city, and using actual locations there (shops or workplaces or pubs and bars and so on) and whether it's okay to do that, or whether you should make up a fictional location**, and what the pros and cons might be of each method.

My take on this is that it's often easier to use a real location, because then you already know it, hopefully, or at least you can look it up online, and look at photos, look at Google Maps. If it's just that your characters need to meet in a coffee shop, there's no reason that you need to make up somewhere for that.

If you need a location in which bad stuff is likely to happen, so if you're perhaps saying anything that could be considered as libel, then that's when you'll want to make up something fictional, so maybe that's an amalgamation of a couple of places.

You'll see this in some novels, so Tom Sharpe's *Porterhouse Blue*, which is set in Cambridge, has the fictional college, Porterhouse, there is no such college, because it's a satirical novel, and I suspect that if he'd set it in a real college there would be legal problems with that.

If you're just using a location in a fairly safe way, then there's no problem with using something real, and I think readers do quite like that. **It's nice to feel that**

the stuff you're reading is real, it really exists out there, and that's perhaps part of the pleasure for people.

On the flip-side, if you do choose to create something fictional, you want to make it convincing. I wouldn't worry too much: unless it's a very small city, readers who have visited it aren't going to know every single pub or workplace or shop or house or whatever it is. Just try to make sure it doesn't conflict horribly with stuff that's real.

So one way you could do it is, like I said, just amalgamate two places into one, or to loosely base it on something that does exist, and I guess at the end of the day this is your choice as the author.

Another option is to use a fictional city or town, again it could be based on something real, or similar to somewhere you already know, but all the places in it can be made up, and this comes down to your personal choice and perhaps the sorts of things you want to do within your novel.

Bill: Good Practices for Developing Writing Skill/Fluency?

The next question is from Bill, who asked **what among my reading and writing practices, or my study and research, had helped me the most in developing writing skill and fluency.**

The thing that's probably helped most of all is reading widely, and reading from quite a young age. I was a keen reader as a child and in my early teens (this was slightly before the days when the internet was quite so widespread, so I didn't have so many exciting things to do with my time). I spent a lot of time reading novels, and that was just something I did, and genuinely enjoyed, outside of school and things.

I've also been going to writing groups and critique groups since I was about fourteen, so the practice of having my work critiqued for the whole of my development as a writer, really, has been invaluable. Just getting feedback,

even though it's quite scary (I know how terrifying I found it at first) is really, really useful, because it points out things in your work where you're doing well, it points out things where you're not doing well, and where you can improve.

Something else that I guess helped me is the fact that my mum's an English teacher, and I realise that that's something that most of us can't choose, but that was definitely useful, because it meant that I got a very good grasp on things like spelling and grammar, from being quite young. My mum, and my dad as well, always supported my writing, and took it seriously, which was obviously a real help as a young writer.

Then, in the more academic context, my school and my university, Cambridge, were both very strong on practical criticism – that's the practice of taking a text and analysing it in very close detail, so looking at sentence structures, and word choices, and just everything that goes into making that work on the level of the text itself, so not perhaps looking at themes and broader stuff in the work, but just seeing how it works paragraph by paragraph. So maybe looking at one poem, or a short excerpt from a novel, or a very short story, or something like that.

And that was really valuable, because it got me to think about words, and how authors choose words, and the effect of them, and **English is such a rich language, where just a slightly different word can have the same meaning, but quite a different connotation.** So, that was definitely something I enjoyed doing, in the academic context, and something that was helpful for me as a fiction writer.

Sean: What Should an Author's Blog be About?

The next question is from Sean, who asks, 'If you're an author, what do you blog about?'

So I think Sean's coming here from the context of a fiction author, somebody who's got maybe a novel, or is working on a novel, or on a series, and they want to blog in order to promote themselves, and to gain readers.

There was a bit of discussion on this in the Q&A thread, and I know Bill had some really good thoughts on it, so I'm not going to go into a huge amount of detail here, partly because I don't think I have all the answers yet anyway! I'm hoping that **this is something that we will see evolving over time, from different independent authors in particular, but also from mainstream authors, who are building up a fan-base online.**

In the Q&A thread, Sean mentioned Joe Konrath, who has a very popular blog aimed at independent authors (jakonrath.blogspot.com). Konrath obviously isn't really blogging for his readers. His books are fast-paced, quite easy-read, thriller types. They're not all in a series, but they're all in the same style, I would say – I've read a few of his.

Konrath's blog is very much aimed at first-time authors who are now indie publishing. I think he started out aiming it at with the traditional publishers, but it's interesting to see how his views have changed over the past few years. I know that Konrath has said that when he gets media attention, so when there's a newspaper article about Joe Konrath selling hundreds of thousands of novels on the Kindle, then it doesn't particularly bring a spike in book sales. **It seems that the people who are interested in independent publishing are not actually Konrath's actually core readers in his genre fiction.**

I would say that if you're just promoting fiction, you probably don't want to be primarily writing for other writers, it's a smaller base of people; not all readers are writers. Many readers are at least slightly interested in the process of writing, so you may well want to blog about the working practices behind your

book, how you put it together, but I think if you had article after article just aimed at people who are practicing fiction writers, that's probably not going to get you quite the right fan-base for your actual books.

So, authors do a bunch of different things here:

- **Some authors will have a back-story for their books**, they'll give you a bit more information on the world or the context, and if you're writing, say, fantasy or science fiction, that's obviously a good fit.
- **Some authors will just have trivia about themselves**, and that works best if you're already relatively well known – but if you've got a particularly interesting life or a good story to tell, then that could well work.
- **You could blog about the research and related topics for your books**, I know Joanna Penn does that, in blogging about Pentecost and that series. You could consider what would interest your target reader, what sort of person is going to be reading your books, and what might they find interesting, and that can be quite difficult to determine.

I know that with *Lycopolis* I've been surprised with the range of different people who have read it outside the target audience I'd have expected, so I'm waiting to see if that settles into more of a pattern as time goes by.

- **Then, of course, you don't have to blog at all.** You could have a website that's very static and maybe has a news section that you update occasionally. You could use an email list to stay in touch with your readers when you have something like 'my next book is out' to tell them.

I guess one thing to consider is that having a blog could backfire slightly, in that if you've got readers who are eagerly waiting for your next book, and you've taken several years to write it, and you're posting blog posts about what you're

up to in life or something, then you may well get people feeling that, 'hey, if he's got time to blog, doesn't he have time to write the next book?'

I know this is how my husband feels about George R. R. Martin, who took forever to get his latest book, I think it's *Dances With Dragons*, out, so **don't let the blogging take over from your actual writing**, particularly when you do get to the stage when you do actually have a fan-base and they're waiting for the next book in a series

Like I say, I don't think I've got all the answers on this one. I think it's something that we're perhaps going to see evolve a bit over time, now that more and more people are coming to the indie scene. **It's definitely worth looking at some indie authors' blogs, and even some traditional authors' websites**, so I think Bill linked to a few in the Q&A thread, and I'll try and dig up a few others, just so that you can see what different people are doing and maybe figure out what could work for you and your audience.

Here are a few to take a look at:

J.A. Konrath (traditional & indie): <http://jakonrath.blogspot.com>

C.S. Friedman (mainly traditional): <http://csfriedman.com>

Amanda Hocking (indie): <http://amandahocking.blogspot.com>

J.F. Penn (indie): <http://joannapenn.com/>

Jasper Fforde (traditional): <http://www.jasperfforde.com>

So, that's all the fiction questions and answers for March. If I missed your question, please do post it again. The Q&A thread got quite long and intricate this month, so it's possible that I've missed one or two, and if not, if you've got a follow up question, or something you want to discuss, please do start up a new thread in the forums. [Writing Chat](#) is probably a good place for this. We can combine some of our collective wisdom, and hopefully get to some really good answers.