



*Ada Palmer*

## 178: Writing Speculative Fiction

**Gabriela Pereira:** Hello, and welcome, word nerds, to DIY MFA Radio, the show that will help you write more, write better, write smarter. I'm Gabriela Pereira, instigator of DIY MFA, and your host for this podcast. Now, let's talk writing.

Hello. Hello, word nerds. Gabriela here, and welcome back to DIY MFA Radio. Our show notes today are over at [diymfa.com/178](http://diymfa.com/178) because it's Episode 178.

Now, today I have the pleasure of hosting Ada Palmer on the show. Her first Science Fiction novel, *Too Like the Lightning*, was a Hugo Best Novel Finalist in 2017. And it's part of a four-book series, which includes the second book, *Seven Surrenders*, and the third book, which just released, titled *The Will to Battle*.

Now, in addition to writing these awesome books, Ada also teaches history at the University of Chicago. And, she composes fantasy, Sci-Fi and mythology-themed music, including the Viking mythology musical stage play *Sundown: Whispers of Ragnarok*. She performs at conventions with her vocal group *Sassafrass*; researches anime and manga; and has worked as a consultant for many anime and manga publishers. Ada blogs for *Tor.com*, and blogs about philosophy and travel at her website, *ExUrbe.com*. So, welcome, Ada. It is so great to have you on the show.

**Ada Palmer:** Thank you. I've been looking forward.

**GP:** So, when I was preparing for this show, I have to say, I don't have this experience very often, but I was reading your bio and looking at your website, and I kind of felt like we were besties who had just never met in real life. Like, there were so many commonalities between the stuff that you're into and the stuff that I'm into, like the singing and the vocal groups. I'm not so much a manga anime girl, but I was a total comic book nerd growing up.

**AP:** I've read *Marvel Forever*.

**GP:** Exactly. *Marvel's* like my favorite. And so speaking of which, who's your favorite *Marvel* superhero? I just have to know.

**AP:** It's a little bit embarrassing, but Baron Zemo from *Thunderbolts*. This was the Kurt Busiek title that was designed to reuse old B-List super villains, so that *Marvel* could keep their copyright on them. But it had really clever writing in the character of Baron Zemo. This is the son of one of the original members of *Hydra*; so a holdover from the days when *Captain America* was fighting Nazis.

The long-term story arc of the character ended up being, how do you move forward from that being your family legacy and try to do things that are socially constructive without feeling like you're betraying your ancestors, but you don't want to be a Nazi anymore? And so it was a very interesting, and deep long-term examination of that question of how you can move from a legacy of historical toxicity to being a positive force in the world.



**GP:** I love that. And even there, I feel like we have something in common, because my absolute favorite Marvel superhero is Daredevil because he is so deeply flawed; and he's got some serious stuff piled against him. You know, he's not the sort of typical, you know, super-duper guy; and yet, and he makes some really bad decisions, but yet he's still someone that you can relate to.

Like, he's trying to do right even though he's making really bad choices, a lot of the time. And that to me, is really compelling, this idea of the flaws and characters who are carrying both very deep flaws and deep wounds, but also, are trying to do right or do what they think is right about something.

And so I feel like that's definitely a common thread in both of those storylines. So, in terms of the diverse interests that you have, one of the things that drew me, especially with looking at your website, one of the things that just jumped out at me is the fact that it's all there.

And, for a lot of new writers, especially, that can be a daunting task, because we're not all people-- Like as writers, we don't usually fit in a neat little box that, you know, we just perfectly like a certain genre or a certain persona.

Like, we all have very diverse, I talk about like my wild, crazy geek, you know, nerdy passions and obsessions. It's hard to put those under one umbrella. How do you do that? Because you do it so beautifully on your website and on your platform overall, how do you get it to hang together? And yet, it still represents everything that you're into.

**AP:** Yeah, it was very hard particularly with developing the website because since I am also a history professor, I know that some people are coming to my website for my Science Fiction. Some people are coming to my website for music. Some people are coming to my website to find the syllabus for the class there are about to take.

[laughter]

**AP:** And, some people are coming to my website because they have to introduce me at an academic lecture and they want my Curriculum Vitae. Figuring out how to nest all of those things on one website so that everyone who was there looking for something in particular would easily find it was a real challenge. One of the things I did was work very closely with a web designer, Jeremiah Tolbert of Clockpunk Studios. Clockpunk Studios specifically designs websites, professional websites for authors; that's all he does.

And so he has a lot of very good tools, but also ideas about how to organize stuff. So, we leaned hard on the fact that there's a unified thread running through everything, no matter how disparate it is which is my interest in ideas changing over time, and especially, human worldviews changing over time.

As an academic, that's what I study. I study what makes our worldviews change over time; important moments that there have been big shifts in people's world-views and how those got triggered; how they spread, what kind of resistance they caused and so on. So, I explore that in my research.

I also explore that in my Science Fiction, which is very much about the differences between the worldview that the people in the 25th century have from our own worldview, and how those two things interact with each other.

But I also explore it in the music, since my music isn't just Viking mythology set to music. It's focusing on what the Viking worldview was, what the Viking ethics were, what the Viking's metaphysics was



and how very different it is from our modern ethics, our modern metaphysics; and indeed, from other mythologies' ethics or metaphysics.

We see a lot of stories that throw different pagan gods together in a kind of hodgepodge and you have Zeus running around, but you also have Thor running around. And whenever you do that, you lose the fact that they had fundamentally different metaphysics; Greek metaphysics, Greek fate, Greek justice work a particular way or a particular palette of ways that change over time. Viking cause most Viking ethics, Viking justice work a totally different way.

And that's what excites me about the myths and the music. So, just like my research on Renaissance Philology, my music about Vikings, my novel about the 25th century; they're all about worldviews changing over time. And so the website kind of uses that common thread to talk about who am I, what am I doing? I'm someone who's interested in the way worldviews change over time. And I explore that through nonfiction, through fiction, and through music.

**GP:** I love that. I love how essentially you've pinpointed what, you know, we talk about a lot at DIY MFA, sort of finding a theme. And usually, when you're thinking about a theme, you're thinking about the theme of a book, right? But it's kind of like you found a unifying theme of your life or of your brand; and that theme then kind of helps to organize everything else that came, you know, with it.

When you were talking about the worldviews and sort of the shifting and the coming together and shifting apart, especially with the Viking, it automatically made me think of-- You have your songs, some of your songs posted on your site. And I was listening to one of them earlier today, My Brother, My Enemy, and how the two voices-- And so this song, I guess, is an interplay between Loki and Odin.

Sometimes they're in conflict with each other, like melodically. And then there are times when they're like synchronized, and that song just so perfectly embodies this idea of worldviews changing and people coming together; and then going against each other. So, I thought like even from the music, it sort of worked.

**AP:** Yeah. And that they agree about some things. And in some ways, they think exactly the same way as each other, but in other things they fundamentally think differently. You can use the shape of the music itself to communicate that shift between; here is what they have in common, and here is what they absolutely don't have in common, which is what causes the strife between them.

**GP:** Exactly. And, sometimes they might have something in common, but the way they see it is still in conflict.

**AP:** I also think parallel to this, for a lot of authors who are, especially authors who are publishing their first book or first set of things, it's very easy to get associated with a sort of particularly narrow theme of that first book, because you don't necessarily anticipate what your second series and your third series are going to be about. And if your first series is a political mystery set in the 25th century, you could design your website to be very much feeling Science Fiction-y, and very much feeling mystery-ish.

And then if the next book that you want to publish is about Vikings, readers and visitors to that website, it won't make any sense because it feels like it doesn't match. It doesn't match in genre, but it still matches intellectually.

So, one of the things that I did and one of the things that I think is a good way to sort of try to guess what your future-self is likely to write about is to make a list of 20 or so of your favorite works of



fiction that you really love and enjoy; ideally, ones that are actually very different from each other and say, “Okay, what is it about all of these that makes me really excited? Why am I excited by this even though it’s not in any way similar to that?”

So, if I make a list of, I really enjoy *Battlestar Galactica*, I really enjoy *Mobile Suit Gundam*, I really enjoy the horror manga of Junji Ito. Boy, are those things different from each other, but in all of them, one of the exciting cores and the reason I discovered I was drawn to them is that they explore worldviews that are different from ours and the individual characters’ worldviews being challenged and changing over the course of the story.

And so from that, you can deduce, ‘oh, hey, that’s what excites me. I bet I’ll keep doing that in all my books, no matter what genre they are, no matter where they’re set. I bet I’ll always look at that.’ So, that can be the theme you use to describe yourself; and it’ll be consistent with all of your future book projects, even the ones you haven’t planned yet.

**GP:** I love that. And I love also that that essentially helps writers avoid the trap and you sort of alluded to it, but the trap that like you sort of pigeon-hole yourself with that first book. And then when the next book comes out, you think, ‘oh my gosh, I need a whole new website or I need a new Facebook page, or I need new Twitter for this new book’.

And like all of a sudden, now, these writers are juggling a platform for every different series they write or every single book they write. And that’s just a recipe for disaster because then you’re going to be, you know, pulled in a million directions and you’re going to be trying to manage a platform instead of writing your next book, which is the whole point.

**AP:** And you can also sometimes be pigeonholed in a different way by the second book or second series, because when you’ve done two things, people think, ‘okay, this is the sort of span of what this author will do. The rest of what they will produce will share all the characteristics that Series A and Series B share.’ So, if your first thing is a Victorian romance and your second thing is a future Mars romance then what people will always expect is romance.

If your first thing is a Victorian romance and your second thing is a Victorian time travel paradox story, what people will always expect is Victorian. Whatever the commonality is between Book A and Book B or Series A and Series B will be what people start to characterize you as, unless you are very careful to try to say, “Actually, what I think is the commonality between these is this other broader set of questions.” So, you can use it to battle the first book pigeonholing and separately to battle the separate second book pigeonhole.

**GP:** Right. It’s like the minute you write the second thing, it’s now you’re establishing a pattern and then people are going to expect that pattern to continue. So yeah, I totally see where you’re going with that. I want to add too, for writers who might be listening and thinking, ‘oh my gosh, I’ve already pigeonholed myself’, and they’re like freaking out; it is possible to re-brand yourself.

I know because I rebranded myself once upon a time. It takes some effort, but it is possible to do so if you’re listening to this episode or as you’re sort of pulling some ideas from this, like don’t panic, just take this and understand that you can make an intentional shift; and it’s not the end of the world if you find that you’ve been pigeonholed up until now.

**AP:** That’s a great point to sit down and say, “What do I think are the essential commonality between these projects, other projects I’ve been imagining and the fiction that I find most exciting?” And you can,



from that assemble, your own description of, 'no, what's common about my work isn't that it's Victorian or isn't that it's a romance. What's common about my work is that it looks at some specific thing'.

**GP:** So, let's shift gears and talk a little bit about sort of the subject matter of your current series, the Terra Ignota Series. You know, when I looked at it and I saw that you, this is like a futuristic, I guess, a political mystery set in the 25th century; and then I saw that you're a historian. Most people might look at those two things and say, "Oh, what's the connection there?" But to me, it totally makes sense because there's so much history woven into the story in very subtle ways. And also, I tend to think that historical fiction and Sci-Fi and fantasy are all kind of in the same cluster of high world-building writing.

**AP:** I think very much so. I also think that being an historian and having the skills of a historian is extremely useful for world-building, because it means I'm used to asking a lot of questions that people often don't think to ask, unless they're used to thinking historically. Like, how did this society's currency system develop?

That's a question that very few Science Fiction or fantasy books can actually answer, but when I'm looking at a real historical situation, it's often a very important question; what currency are they using, and how did they, how did it develop; because it will give you a whole micro history of the economics and political relations of that place.

And there are lots of questions like that. What is the dominant fiber they use for fabric? What do they use to fix dye into their fabric? Is this a technological challenge that has created tensions in the past if the place that produces the fiber and the place that has the chemicals necessary to dye the fiber aren't the same?

Does that mean there was a series of trade wars or alliances that work into the fabric of the past of your society, and all these sorts of questions that I instinctively feel like I want answers to from any imaginary society, whether it's past or future and a need from any real society? You know, if I get together with a friend of mine who introduces me to an academic I've never met, who studied The Hittites, one of the first questions we're going to talk about is, what currency did they use? How did they develop?

And you know, and I'm not an economic historian, I'm actually an intellectual historian. So, I focus on literature and philosophy. But even for that, you absolutely have to understand the money because philosophy is strongly shaped by economics. In order to have literature written, the person who is writing the text has to have something to live on because that person isn't farming or whittling or making chairs.

So, there has to be an economy that supports the production of literature. How does that work? Who pays the person who wrote this book? Is this person paid by their publisher from people who buy the book; is this person paid by a patron to whom they dedicate the book, and then they get a bag of gold every year for dedicating their book to a patron? Do you have to be independently wealthy in order to be a philosopher in this society?

If so, you're going to get very different philosophy from if it's a space where entering the world of literature is actually a form of social mobility that anyone can do it and make money at. All of these sorts of questions really shape the ideas the society is capable of spreading around because it shapes the ideas and the kinds of people that are capable of putting pen to paper.

**GP:** Let's talk a little bit about how this plays out in some well-known works of Science Fiction. Like, as you were talking about this, I started thinking of-- I happen to love Star Wars; I'm a total, totally obsessed with it. One of the things though that I notice is that they really don't deal with the concept of money.



I mean, they kind of do with the trade wars in the first Episode One, but that was just something that most Star Wars fans would choose to forget ever happened. And then, but, if you're looking at the sort of core episodes, four through six, you don't really see anyone talk about money.

**AP:** Yeah. I mean, we're aware of wealth gaps. There are some people who are clearly living in a state of poverty, and there are other people who are clearly not living in a state of poverty.

**GP:** And clearly, the Empire has the money to build not one, but two Death Stars. Like, clearly, they have the ability to do that. And, you know, we get hints of like the fact that in, you know, that very forgettable first episode that there's like a whole slave trade going on in Tatooine. And there's all this weird stuff going on there.

And like, you know, Anakin buys his freedom. And then when *The Force Awakens* comes along, all of a sudden we find out that they're like these credits and, you know, she can-- Rey can trade stuff for like food credits or something, but we don't know what those are.

**AP:** Yeah. But it might actually be that the currency is the food, is another possibility that it's a standardized barter system.

**GP:** Yeah. So, it's interesting that like this currency system was retroactively imposed, I think, on this world.

**AP:** But we don't know whether that currency system is used everywhere or whether that currency system is only used in the space where Rey was.

**GP:** Exactly.

**AP:** Because one thing that is very normal for the history of civilizations is for there to be a bunch of different currency systems layered on top of each other and fulfilling different functions. It's not the case that story has to have a currency system and an explanation to where fabric comes from and all these other things. But very frequently, if you follow these question palettes, they help you world-build. They help you come up with extra interesting plot and layering.

So, I was chatting with a friend who was working on a very traditional medieval-esque setting world fantasy story; and was starting to world-build and trying to figure out what the places would be in the world. And, had written an opening chapter, which had a protagonist enter, looking really awesome in a long red cloak. And I said, "Okay, well, if it's red, red dye is very difficult and you need-- You know, is this wool?"

"Yes, it's wool." "Okay. So, you need alum, and you need one of the sources of bright red dye, like Cochineal, which only comes from tropical regions. So, that means that there has to be some kind of trade between a tropical region; somewhere that has the mind to produce the alum, which is the chemical necessary to make the red stick to the wool, and then separately, a place that produces wool."

And within five minutes, there are suddenly different regions, different climates, and a trade network between these three powers that can then be disrupted and manipulated by the bad guy and become a core of why two areas might be aligned, and a third might be an enemy.

**GP:** And, it's interesting too, drawing again from, you know, an existing worlds that a lot of people are familiar with; in *The Hunger Games*, this problem is solved essentially by having each district have a thing. So, like, you know, District 12 is like the coal district, and District Four is the fishing and, you know, port district; and each district kind of has the thing that they are economically responsible for.



And obviously, like in most normal societies, yes, there are regional aspects. Like there are certain parts of the United States that are agriculture centers, but it's not nearly as neatly encapsulated as these districts are in the book, but it makes it easier, I think, for readers to wrap their heads around how the system came together. And, given that that's a world that's very, you know, it's been very manicured and sort of dominated by the sort of political stuff that's going on, it made sense for that story.

**AP:** And, there have been historical corollaries. I mean, if you think of Venice's island of Murano, which was where the glass workers lived and on pain of death were not allowed to leave, that's a historical reality.

**GP:** Exactly. So, talk about how you actually world-build, because one of the traps that I see a lot of newer writers who want to go into these very heavily world-building genres, and they want to create these big, expansive worlds; worlds that feel like they extend beyond the scope of the story.

Often, the trap they fall into is that they spend so much time building that world that they forget to write the story. So, how do you balance that out in your own process so that you have these pieces in place and you're answering the important questions, but that you're also not setting aside the storytelling in order to build the world and then forget all about it?

**AP:** Well, I guess I don't think my answer is going to help the people who have the problem you describe. I world-build incredibly slowly and patiently over years, but I will build more than one world at the same time. So, with the world of the series of Terra Ignota, I was world-building that for five years before I sat down to write the outline of the series, and then before I wrote a single paragraph of it.

So, it was incredibly thoroughly developed with all of its politics and all of its history, and long timelines of the history of the world that I wrote up in various files and maps and so on, well before I started writing about it, but what-- And, if you used that method and only worked on one world at a time, it would mean there would be a five-year gap between when you could start writing one book and when you could then start writing the next book, but I'll world-build multiple worlds at the same time.

And so at the same time that I was developing that world, I was also developing the world for the second series I'm going to work and the third series. And indeed, the world's for the earlier novels that I wrote that weren't good enough to be published, but nonetheless, that I had done the world-building for. My usual technique is that I sort of have them in an order of, 'this is the one I want to work on. Primary, this is number two. This is number three.'

And whenever I get an idea for a thing that could be in a story; it might be a device, it might be a person, it might be a relationship, it might be a place; I will think about that first world and say, 'ah, would this idea fit in that world? Is it consistent with the other things that in that world already?'

And if the answer is, yes, then I'll try plugging it into that world, and say, "Okay, if this is in that world, what does that do? What are the implications of it?" And if it doesn't fit in that world, I'll say, "Okay, does it fit in world #Number Two? Yes or no. Does it fit in world #Number Three?"

And it means that I'm not sitting down to world-build by having a blank space and trying to fill it. It's much more that I'll come up with a neat idea and then I'll say, "Okay, does that fit in a world? Would that enhance the world?"

I think when you come up with ideas by themselves, not preset it to be in a world and then see if they fit in the world, you're more likely to come up with things that are not stereotypical for that genre. One



of the characters in *Too Like the Lightning* is Sniper, who's a professional living doll. They market dolls of this person, and this person is a sort of professional celebrity, whose thing is they let people dress them up as whatever they want.

They comport themselves all the time as if they are a living doll. And that idea came to me very spontaneously, sort of out of nowhere. And then that idea isn't specific to any genre. You know, it's specific to a world that has dolls in it, but that could be in a Victorian story, or it could be in the *Star Wars* universe, or it could be in anything that has dolls.

And then I put it and said, "Okay, what would happen if this person were in the world of *Too Like the Lightning*? Oh, interesting. The odd gender stuff that's going on in the world of *Too Like the Lightning* would intersect very interestingly with someone who was a professional living doll that works really well", but I could just as easily have tried to put that idea into a medieval-ish fantasy or a Victorian story.

And in any of them, it would've been something new and fresh and that you wouldn't expect in that genre, but that nonetheless can fit in that genre. So, I don't world-build by sitting down with the world and say, "Okay, today, it's time to come up with this." I world-build much more often with, "Okay, here's a cool idea out of nowhere, what would happen if that were an ingredient added into this world?"

**GP:** I love that. And so let's talk a little bit about the world-building in play in the very beginning of *Too Like the Lightning*. One of the things that I love about out that opening chapter is that we're kind of plunked right in there. Kind of, I mean, it reminded me a lot of *Star Wars* Episode Four, where like there are lasers and spaceships, you know, lasering at each other.

We don't really know who the good guys or bad guys are, but there's stuff happening; and we're just sort of caught in the middle of it. And then we sort of put the pieces together, obviously, the opening of *Too Like the Lightning* does not involve spaceships, but it involves people kind of being thrown into a situation together. And, it's kind of a weird situation. [laughs] And, they're trying to--

At least, one of the characters has no idea what's going on and is trying to figure that out. So, can you talk about how you put that scene together and gave readers just enough so that we could follow what was going on without the classic info-dump model, where you like, you know, where writers over-describe everything?

**AP:** Right. So, I tried very hard to think of what the narrator would bother to mention. And this is one of the arenas in which having a first-person narrator, who is telling a story rather than just witnessing it neutrally in third-person, helps a lot because *Too Like the Lightning*, isn't following somebody's consciousness. *Too Like the Lightning* is a history which a person sat down and wrote as a piece of text in the world.

And because of that, it means I know who the audience is that this text was being written for. And I know what the narrator knows and what the narrator doesn't know; and I know what the narrator thinks is important and has to be explained, and what the narrator doesn't think is important and has to be explained.

And so if the narrator says the car came into land in front of the glass Bosch house, which is one of the row of Bosch houses on the side of the mountain; you, the actual reader don't understand why a car would come into land, but you can deduce it. It means that the car was in flight and you don't know what a Bosch house is, but you've learned the word Bosch house and that you need to figure out is later; and that it seems to be something normal, and that there's a lot of.





But the narrator wouldn't bother to explain these things at that point because the narrator's audience knows what they are because they're normal in that world. And so I always have the narrator explain things that narrator thinks that his audience won't understand, but not explain the things that he assumes his audience will understand.

And you, the real reader, learn a lot about his world from that because you haven't only learned that there is such a thing as a Bosch house. You've learned that there is such a thing as a Bosch house, and that it's normal and unimportant; and that everyone in this world knows what that is, which is an important fact.

Whereas if he said, "The car came to land in front of the Busch house, which is a blah, blah, blah, blah, blah", then you would know that people don't know what that is, and it's unusual. We often don't think enough, I think, about the fact that often second-order and even third-order information can be conveyed by a single piece of information.

So, on the very opening page of this book, it says, it gives a list of Censor's permissions, all of the different censorate bodies and government bodies that have given permission for this book to be published. The fact that that even exists tells this is the future with censorship. And that's told you a lot about the world, but it then lists all the different people who have given permission to censor things.

And two of the things that are listed are the Mitsubishi executive directorate and His Majesty Isabel Carlos II (the second) King of Spain. You've just learned a huge amount of secondary information about this world. You've learned that Spain is still a meaningful category. You've learned that the monarchies or, at least, one of them that exists now still exists in the future.

You've learned that the Mitsubishi still exists, which implies that probably other corporations still exist. So, what does that tell you? That tells you this isn't supposed apocalyptic world, because there wouldn't be that many continuities.

This tells you that it isn't a, there's only one earth government, you know, everything is homogenized; Star Trek kind of future because if there's still a King of Spain, you've learned a huge amount about what is and isn't true just by the narrator mentioning that the King of Spain and the Mitsubishi exists. And so those pieces of information convey secondary information.

It doesn't just tell you there is a king of Spain. It tells you a whole lot of information about how much continuity there is between this 25th century and our present; and what cultural elements and political elements that exist now are likely to exist there.

**GP:** What I love about-- I mean, I want to unpack so much of what you just said, because there's so much juicy stuff in there. One of the things that I love about that is the idea that it makes the reader kind of into a detective. Like, we become actively engaged in the story because we're actively engaged in trying to figure out this stuff and put these little pieces of secondary information together.

Instead of having it be spoon-fed to us and, you know, having sort of a preamble saying, 'in a post-apocalyptic or a non-post-apocalyptic world, where there's continuity and the king of Spain still exists'. Like, we are putting together those clues, which I think makes the reader much more active.

The other thing that I love about that opening and sort of this idea of the secondary information and the narrator is this notion that when you have a first-person narrator, they are telling the story to someone.



And, most of the time, first-person narrators are not-- Like; we don't acknowledge who the recipient of that narration is, and it's okay. Like, if you think of *The Hunger Games*, it's in first-person present tense. We kind of get the feeling that we're just right there with Katniss Everdeen. We're not really thinking too hard as to who she's telling this story to.

**AP:** Yeah. She's our camera lens--

**GP:** Exactly.

**AP:** -through which we're watching a sequence of events.

**GP:** But, you know, in a book like *The Book Thief* where death is sort of this first-person Omniscient character, clearly that character is telling the story to someone, but it's not a specific someone; it's sort of like a generalized someone, but there's still that sense of like the meta-story of it being told.

In this case, it's like even more specific, like it's clearly a history that is being documented. I love also the, what you said about how the things that this narrator chooses to point out to their readers are things that tend to be very obvious to us as readers. So, like the whole gender stuff, which I thought was hilarious and awesome.

**AP:** Yeah. The narrator takes great pains to explain how the pronouns 'He and She' work because apparently, we learn from this that 'He and She' are not used in this society that the narrator is writing from, and it feels that these have to be explained. Also, the way the narrator uses 'He and She' are from our perspective, totally wrong.

The narrator is using these pronouns in ways that nobody today uses these pronouns which is constructed in an intentional parallel with we have people who use Thee and Thou in fiction. I mean, Darth Vader addresses The Empire with Thee and Thou in *Star Wars*. The way Thee and Thou is used in *Star Wars* and indeed in a lot of literature that uses it, is not how it was actually used when it was a normal part of speech. It's how the authors think that it was used or it's a new way that the author is deploying it.

**GP:** And, it shows to us also that that mode of speaking is not native to this narrator, right? That like this narrator is sort of trying to artificially impose this way of speaking kind of like the way someone who's almost fluent in a second language, but will still make like, sort of those small syntactical errors that only someone who's truly fluent would pick up on. It's kind of like that.

**AP:** Exactly. And so the weird and unexpected, and sometimes inconsistent way that the narrator uses the pronouns teaches us a lot about the narrator's views on gender and more broadly, this society's relationship with gender.

**GP:** So, another thing that really jumped out at me in that first scene was that there are moments when, as a reader, I'm picturing it in my mind, or I'm experiencing it, I'm right in their scene with this character; and then all of a sudden, something gets flipped on its head. The Major was an example of this, where, at first, I was convinced The Major was a person; and that took me by surprise.

So, can you talk a little bit about creating those surprise elements, and yet, keeping the reader trusting in the narrative? Because I didn't feel like the rug was pulled out from under me. I just felt like, 'oh, now I get it', moving on; and then you sort of continue with the story, but a lot of writers when they're starting and they create these little like gotcha moments, it's almost like too much of a gotcha. And then the story falls apart because the reader loses their trust.



**AP:** Well, this is an interesting one because there are two different plot threats introduced at the beginning in two different consecutive chapters. One of them is the chapter in which you meet this kid called Bridger in which you meet the major. The other one is this chapter in which a detective called Martin Guildbreaker shows up upstairs at the same house at the same time to investigate a break in.

So, you have two things. One is the mystery, and the other is this kid. I played with different drafts that introduced those plot threads in the other order. So, there are older drafts of this that have the mystery introduced first and the kid introduced second, and others that are the other way around. I tested these on different readers. It worked much better to introduce the kid first and the mystery second because of, I think, two different things.

So, the mystery is very tied with the world and the politics, and you learn a huge amount about different newspapers and different political factions and the states of this and that. And it's a very good world-building plunge into a very straightforwardly Science Fictional world, full of lots of new material. And, it's really exciting.

But the other chapter which comes before it in the current version, you meet this child who seems to have the supernatural ability to bring toys to life, and who has a bunch of plastic toy soldiers that this child has brought to life; one of whom has just been killed, and so the child is dealing with grief.

And so you see adults trying to comfort and advise a child who is dealing with grief, and then who is dealing with the extra complication of, 'since this child can turn toys into life, this child can make a toy resurrection potent into a real resurrection potent and bring the toy friend back from the dead if the child uses to, should the child do this'. That worked much better first for two reasons.

One is that for all the strange setting and the strange issue, a child mourning, who has lost a friend and is being comforted and advised by adults is a very universal, a very familiar, a very approachable situation. You can understand it. You can develop an emotional connection with these people and feel strong emotions and empathy with that, no matter when in time that's taking place.

And if these were cave men, you would still recognize a child in grief and adults trying to comfort that child; and it would still be a powerful human situation. So, it means you can develop a strong emotional connection because it's something you understand fully in the midst of all of the other things that you understand only partially because the world-building is unfolding.

And by beginning with that, it gives the reader a kind of anchor where you say, "Okay, at least, there's one thing I fully understand. And it's this emotional connection with how sad this child is, even while everything else around me, I'm seeing only in pieces and I have to be patient until more of those pieces come together."

**GP:** I think actually there's even more. There's actually another thing that I think is really universal; and that's the grappling with death thing, which is not just universal, like a child grieving is universal, but everyone not just like a person who's been around a child who's grieving or who's lost someone, but everyone grapples with like, what happens when you die and what do you do?

And, all of those questions that come up as the child is wondering, like, 'where do they go? Can I bring them back? Would it be wrong to bring them back if they're happy? But what if they're in a bad place, then I need to bring them back.' All of those questions, I think are ones that anyone who is a human being would grapple with or think about at some point.



**AP:** And so that comprehensible, easy to relate to anchor, goes a long way in a world, in a book in which you have to wait for many, many chapters for the rest of the mysteries that are introduced in the beginning to make any sense. You really don't fully understand the implications of the break-in that is introduced in Chapter Three until the last chapter of the book, which is a long time to be patient.

And so that can't be your main investment because if it is, you'll be impatient, you'll get impatient along the way. But instead, the primary investment is in this question of that, which everyone can relate to. The other thing that is important for it is that this is a Science Fiction book. It also has a supernatural fantasy-esque element, the child's power to bring toys to life.

And it's vital to introduce that early because when you have a Science Fiction world where everything feels Science Fictiony and everyone settles into, 'okay, this is a Science Fiction book'; and then you pull in a supernatural element, it can feel like a betrayal of the genre. It can feel like it's breaking expectations, and you get an experience that I sometimes like to call Fiction Burn.

Fiction Burn is when the reader has very specific expectations of promises that were made by the author, generally in the form of genre and then they're broken. These will be unspoken promises of some sort. Fiction Burn can occasionally, when wielded intentionally, be very powerful.

Like, if you're writing a horror story and everyone knows that in a horror story, the main POV character won't die, everyone else will die around them and they'll make it out at the end; if you then kill the main POV character, two-thirds of the way through, it's really shocking in a way that it's not shocking when anyone else dies because it feels as if an unspoken genre promise was broken.

It can occasionally, in that way be a very effective tool to wheel, but you never want to create Fiction Burn accidentally. And so you don't want to make a social contract with your reader in you've introduced a whole lot of Science Fictional stuff, and there was a Science Fictional prompt on the cover and there was a flying car on the cover and everything you've done promises, 'this is science fiction'. 'Oh, suddenly there's magic.'

You can really upset a reader like that. And so it worked better to introduce the supernatural element right away in that golden moment of the first interaction between the reader and the world, when the reader doesn't yet know what genre this is for sure, and is more open-minded about learning what genre it is; as opposed to, if you do it in the middle where it can feel shocking and uncomfortable.

**GP:** I wholeheartedly agree. I mean, it's funny that you talk about fiction burn and the promise because at DIY MFA, I often talk about the five promises that writers must make to their readers within the first five pages.

And those five promises just for our listeners benefit, they're; a character, a voice, a world, problem, and an event. In a way, the world, the genre is the world's promise, right? That you're sort of promising, that the world is going to operate in a certain way; and that's usually set up pretty early on.

I mean, I'm thinking when you were talking about the supernatural force in a Sci-Fi world, again, not to harp on Star Wars, but the idea of the force comes in pretty early in the very first Star Wars movie, even though, you know, we don't really see a whole lot of force stuff happen until Empire strikes back. Like, we see a little bit of like the, you know, him shooting at the Death Star and "Use the Force, Luke.", and all that stuff. But really, it's like, 'okay, he could have just gotten lucky'.

**AP:** Imagine if The Force hadn't been mentioned until the third movie.



**GP:** I know, right?

**AP:** It would've felt like it came out of nowhere and was confusing, or it could have been set up incredibly, incredibly carefully so that it would feel right, but it takes a lot of artistry to do that; and it's worth trying to do, but it takes a lot of very careful setting up. Actually, the Battlestar Galactica TV series is a very good example of this because more and more metaphysics and religion-related stuff starts manifesting in the later part of the series.

And a lot of the fans who didn't like the later part of the series, felt that their frustration was that they didn't expect this religious and metaphysical stuff, which was, in fact, set up from the beginning, but it was set up so subtly that it didn't work for most viewers; only a few viewers picked up on it and took it seriously as a plot thread.

They were trying to set it up, but they didn't set it up well enough to serve the majority of their viewers. And so a lot of viewers of Battlestar Galactica got fiction burned when it came to the stages of like, 'guys, the metaphysic it's real stuff is actually happening'.

**GP:** That is such an excellent point. I feel like we could geek out over the stuff literally for hours, but I want to hear about what's next for you?

**AP:** Well, just briefly before that. I was hearing your five promises, which I think are very good set. If I can recommend one book that is incredibly effective at helping people identify those promises, it's a book that's actually quoted at the beginning of *Too Like the Lightning*, and was part of my inspiration for it, by Diderot, the 18th century philosopher. The book is called *Jacques the Fatalist and his Master*. It is a book which may zero of those five promises.

**GP:** Now I have to read it.

**AP:** It is not in the genre. There aren't characters. There isn't plot. The voice is confusing. Maybe it makes the voice promise. I would say it maybe makes the voice promise, but none of the other ones. My description of this book is that the only contract Diderot has made with you is that after you read each sentence, you will desire to read the next sentence, but there is no further continuity.

He'll sometimes introduce characters or things that seem to be going on, and then he'll just completely drop them and do other stuff. It's a fascinating, delightful, hilarious book. But when you read it, you learn an enormous amount about writing by getting to all of these moments where Diderot does something, and you say, "No, Diderot, you're not allowed to do that."

Wait, why do I feel viscerally that an author is not allowed to do that? And, he does intentionally all the things you're not allowed to do. He breaks all of the contracts with the reader. By reading it, you learn to be conscious of those contracts. I cannot recommend any book that improves your understanding of the author-reader contract more than *Jacques the Fatalist and his Master*. So fascinating, also infuriating.

**GP:** I will make sure to link to that in our show notes as well, so our listeners can find that book as well. And now, I have to read it like, seriously; I'm going to have to go on Amazon immediately after this interview and get a copy of this book. So, tell us a little bit about what's next. So, *The Will to Battle* is just out right now. *Seven Surrenders* has been out for a while, obviously, *Too Like the Lightning*; and you have a fourth book in the series, but then you hinted that there were other series in the works as well. So, what do you have coming up?



**AP:** I'm well into writing the fourth book, I aspire to finish it in the spring. I don't know whether I will succeed or not primarily because I have an invisible disability Crohn's disease and complications from Crohn's disease, which means I can never predict how many days in a week I will be fit to work. I spend some days just unable to move.

And so that has slowed down the progress on Book Four, and I hope that it will be done in this spring, but I can't make a firm promise, which is frustrating. But one of the wonderful things about working with Tor Books is that they're really patient and understanding with that problem.

**GP:** Also, I wanted to thank you for sharing that because so many of my listeners and word nerds talk about, you know, have either disabilities or hurdles that keep them from being able to sort of follow a regimented writing pattern. And, I also grapple with an invisible disability. I have bipolar. So, for me, it's a different beast. It's not so much a physical thing as a mental thing, but I don't know if I'm going to have a good week or a bad week.

**AP:** Right. Those are very parallel things. It's, every morning you wake up and find out, is today going to be a day on which I can work or not?

**GP:** Exactly. I recently had a few days when I woke up, and I was like, "Wow, this is going to be an 'in bed all day' kind of day. All right, then"; and you move on. So, thank you for sharing that.

**AP:** Happy to. It's something that I was very nervous about sharing for a long time, but I had an attack in the middle of the Hugo ceremony. So, everyone saw this when I came up to accept a Campbell award. So, I had no option at that point, but it's been-- I've had an overwhelmingly positive reaction from people about the courage of sharing it. So, that's been a great comment on our greater reader culture as being really supportive.

**GP:** I totally, totally agree. I had grappled for a long time with sharing my bipolar with my listeners and with my readers. And then last year after the election, for a number of reasons that we don't need to get into right now, but after the election happened, I saw a lot out of my own internal struggles that I'd had for many years being mirrored by people's responses, public responses, to how the election had played out. And it just was the right moment for me to share this thing, and so I shared it. And, like you said, the overwhelming sort of warmth that people, you know, have when you share something vulnerable like that; it's terrifying in the moment, but afterwards, I think, in the end, it can be of service to so many people.

**AP:** Well, and you get occasional nasty reaction, and I got a nasty reaction, but there were so many more positive ones that it just made me delighted with my fellow human beings.

**GP:** Exactly. It kind of renews your faith in humanity.

**AP:** Yeah, well, I think it had not wavered, but it certainly armors it against assault. So, after this series, I'm working on a Viking mythology-focused series, which will probably be two books provisionally called Horse Fire. And it relates somewhat to the themes that I explore in my music. So, for people who've been enjoying the polyphony music, there will be a lot of those themes explored more in the book.

And then I have a couple of other worlds I'm building for further out. One of them is a very, very grim setting that I might best characterize as survival horror. Another one is a very grand epic-ish feeling world. And another one, that's a sort of fun whimsical exploration of immortal people living among us on real-worlders and how they have a lot of fun. So, very different project prepped for the next few things, but Vikings first.



**GP:** You touched on the music and how that is sort of playing out the same themes in the Viking. Do you see an intersection between what you've done in terms of the music and like the theater stuff? Do you see that intersecting with the book in any way, like beyond just the same themes being explored?

**AP:** I mean, I think very much, but, let's see, how does he put this? I spent a long time working closely with the primary sources of mythology. And, one of the interesting challenges of the primary sources is that they're very fragmentary. There's a lot missing. There are a lot of questions that aren't answered, and there's also a lot of stuff that contradicts itself.

And, in the music, I tried to explore the texts that we have and try to imagine in more depth the potential motivations of the characters. So, the texts, for example, don't tell us anything about why Loki chose to kill Baldur. We have to speculate and fill that in. And that's what I do in the music, but in the music, I don't make up and add extra stuff to fill in gaps of things.

I try to imagine motivations, but I try to leave all the factual stuff, being only factual stuff that's present in the sagas and in theaters. The novel is going to have more speculative additions, moments where I say, "This fragment could refer to this other fragment." Well, we don't actually have evidence for that, I'm going to plug those two things together and make up something a little bit new. So, they're going to be related.

And the character motivations will be generally consistent between the two, but the novel is going to have a lot more speculation. Whereas the songs really we're trying to teach the stories as we have them and not to try to fill in things we don't have.

**GP:** Gotcha! So, I always end each interview with the same question, and you've already given us so many words of wisdom throughout this episode. It seems almost silly to ask this question, but what is your number one tip for writers?

**AP:** Give your best hours to writing. We have a lot of different tasks we have to do. We do email, we do cooking, we do our laundry, we do whatever we do for work that isn't writing. We do rest. Most of those things can be done in hours when you're kind of tired, in hours when you're a little groggy, in hours that aren't your best, but writing really needs your best hours. So, figure out when your best hours are, which is unique to everyone.

For some people, it might be when you wake up in the morning. For some people, it might be right after lunch. For some people, it might always be the weekend. But if you figure out when your best hours are, protect those hours; use them for your writing. Never give them to email, never give them to laundry. Protect them because your other tasks will get done in your other time; but your writing will be its best.

And, it's most enjoyable if you give it your best hours. If you try to force yourself to write when you're tired and exhausted from work and whatever else, the writing won't come out well, you won't enjoy it. You won't want to go back to it because it will have a sour taste, and it won't go as well. You don't have to write tons and tons of hours every week, if you write in your best hours every week.

**GP:** That is such great advice. And I love what you said; you know, don't give those hours to email or give those hours to laundry. I mean, it's almost like we're relinquishing our hours to things that don't deserve them. So, I love how you phrase that.

**AP:** Well, because we often feel, 'I want to get X minor task out of the way so that then I can concentrate on the important task'. And, it's very important to fight against that instinct, say, "No,



I'm going to do the important task now; and the less important task, it will get done later." Now, sometimes you can't do that. Sometimes you genuinely have a deadline the next day, and that's okay but make those exceptions rare.

Don't let yourself get into the habit of doing it all the time, because when I do that, that's when I don't put, when I say, "Eh, I'll just do a little bit of email before I write this morning." Next thing you know, the writing time is already gone. So yeah, protecting those hours and giving them on to the writing, which deserves them and not to the secondary tasks, which don't.

**GP:** I do the same thing. I have this-- I reserve certain blocks of time in my day for the important, but not urgent tasks. And, writing is often one of those things that's important, but not immediately urgent; and/or other things that are, you know, for DIY MFA important, but not urgent. Otherwise, we're always going to be swatting flies and trying to get that urgent thing; and somehow, the urgent stuff always gets done anyway.

**AP:** Yep. It's just exactly the advice that young academics get, because with young academics, we always have to make a syllabus. We always have to be grading papers. We always have to be preparing for a department meeting. And yet, when it comes time to be up for tenure, if your book is done, you get tenure; if your book is not done, you're fired; period.

None of the rest of it actually matters. But because the deadline for the book is five years away, it's really easy to put it off, when the deadline for the grading is tomorrow. You have to carve out hours for those big, important, long-term projects; otherwise, they won't get done when that Five Zero away deadline comes.

**GP:** I wholeheartedly agree, and I couldn't have said it better myself. It's been so much fun talking to you. I seriously feel like we could continue geeking out for like the next five hours, but we both have things important, but not urgent things we need to do--

**AP:** [laughs] Yeah.

**GP:** But thank you so much for being on the show. This was a blast.

**AP:** Yeah. This was a pleasure. I loved discussing the craft of writing, so this is a little treat.

**GP:** All right, word nerds. Thanks so much for listening. Keep writing and keep being awesome.

