Writing Fantasy

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Writing Fantasy

Part One: The Story

Ethan Childs
The sky was nothing other than a rich blue expanse, stretching endlessly in every direction until the pale light of the horizon dulled its color as it sank beneath the treetops. The divine light of the sun forced all watchful eyes to avert their gaze or seek to hide their faces in shade. Just looking up to the heavens was enough to impress the stillness of the world into the heart of every creature that poked its head out from under the leaves sprouting from reborn trees or rocks which scattered the soft earth beneath their canopy. The air was so still that the slightest whisper of a passing angel would sing out across the roots and grass to every ear that stopped but a moment to listen. Not a single leaf flickered on the nearby oaks, and not a sound could be heard aside from occasional bird calls and squirrels chewing their way through nuts finally thawed after months buried beneath the ground.

Amid the tranquility there was a clearing where lush patches of grass grew atop the warm bare rock which kept even the mightiest trees at bay. Atop the rock, on such a patch of grass, is where I sat. My mind drifted between unconsciousness and a dull awareness of the plants ticking my legs, the sun on my hair and neck, and the soft red glow of daylight refusing to be ignored through closed eyes. At times I felt as though my mind and body were nothing other than a character in some dream, and other times it was as though the whole world had collected itself into the slight area in which my body made contact with the ground.

It would have been impossible to say how long I had been there, unmoving in the small opening of the forest, although there was no real reason to worry about such a matter either. The entire world stood still. Even the light ruffle of leaves or patter of tiny claws on a rock as chipmunks or birds sifted along the ground for seeds was nothing more than a fleeting moment in time, lost to history in the same instant they made themselves present.
Still, there was life to it all. There was life to the stillness, the warmth, the trees, and the foraging animals, even if that life was nothing more than a trace of dirt under the leaves left over from a burrowing mouse hiding away from the watchful eyes of hawks and owls high above.

I could feel this life, this movement. To me, it was a song resonating down to my bones. A song I could listen to for days, even months on end and never tire of its rhythm. And with the song there was a voice; one with a low pitch like the godly purr of a distant thunderstorm.

It sang to me, “Are you ready?”

“Yes,” I replied, although I am not certain if any sound passed between the narrow space of my lips. I spoke so gently, if at all, trying not to mar the gracious flow of the silence around me.

“No, try,” the thunder purred again.

Gently, silently, as if I were kissing the passing angel, I drew air into my lungs. I could feel the cool rush as it swept down my throat to fill my chest and stomach, and I could feel the pressure on my back as the ribs around my lungs slowly stretched to make room for the incoming breath. I felt also the slightest tension drift away as my chest and stomach relaxed into place, and the newly warmed air swept out through my nose and mouth. Even my arms, legs, and cheeks drooped slightly as I exhaled until I became utterly aware of every twitch and prickle in my body.

In. Out. In again.

And with each breath there was something else. Aside from the tingling, twitching, and small cramps I was too painfully aware of, I could feel something pulsing in and out. It flowed and crept through space like air, but it was not bound to my throat and lungs in the same way. It moved freely through my skin, sweeping along the lines of my veins and wrapping itself around my muscles and bones. It touched everywhere inside of me, tickling the dark corners and
crannies both inside and out that I normally would never give a second thought to. It was in my toes, under my nails, dancing around every hair and pore with incomprehensible purpose. I could feel it creep around my thigh, crossing over my hips, wrapping itself around the bones in my spine, and spreading out to my arms where it touched every fold and wrinkle it could find. It was just under my skin at the same time as it burrowed to the core of my stomach, and there was no place in between left untouched. I could even feel its tendrils stretch throughout my head, touching my eyes and ears, delving into the creases of my brain where it plunged into my every memory and sensation. It was everywhere, in everything, and it created entire canals connecting my own form to the world around me.

And I could follow those canals. Even as I felt it exploring the depths of my own mind, I could let my mind wander along those same paths. I could see the rivers of blood pumping from my heart and feel the warmth they spread to my limbs. I could hear every creak and moan in my skeleton, and even the powdery crunch of dry leaves trapped underneath me. I could feel the powdery crunch of dry leaves trapped underneath me. In the same way that my mind had travelled to each tiny fragment, the leaf, too, had travelled back and become a part of me as well. No longer was I a separate unit, living and functioning apart from the world. Now I was a part of it, and with a burst of euphoria I let myself dash through the earth, soaking in the moisture of the soil, racing along the roots of grass and flowers, and rushing through the bodies of every underground creature I met along the way. It was absolute freedom, unconstrained by any barrier known to man.

I let my mind wander for a time before settling on the roots of one single plant. It must have been a dandelion, tall and flexible, although it had not yet opened. The yellow petals were still
entombed in their soft green cocoon, and I could tell they had not yet tasted the warmth of the sun across its surface. On its own it would bloom any day now, perhaps any hour.

I spread myself throughout the flower, exploring it as I would my own body. Then, as if I were taking a deep breath from within the dandelion itself, or as if I were grabbing at some invisible substance floating through space, I drew in the mysterious canals and pushed them up into the tightly wrapped bud. I could feel energy seep in from everywhere; from the animals in the ground to the dried leaves, even from my own limbs as the dandelion silently shuddered.

The energy slowly faded out of the flower as I drew away from it, receding back into myself, letting go of the little pathways throughout my body, feeling my chest and stomach expand and contract as my lungs filled with air, and drew my attention to each individual breath I took.

In. Out. In again.

I opened my eyes, squinting against the onslaught of bright light, focusing on the ground to give them a chance to adjust. I blinked several times and lifted my head, looking around the patch of grass where I sat until I spotted a dandelion just out of arm’s reach off to one side. The bud had opened, and the yellow petals had sprung forth into the world to greet the gentle sun in a brilliant yellow circle.

But even as the dandelion had blossomed into its perfect golden dial, it had wilted, hanging limply, tinged brown in the day’s heat, dead long before its time.

I hung my head in shame. The sun burned my head and neck, my arms, any place my skin was exposed to its rays. I could tell where every stinging red mark would appear, where my skin would crack and flake away within the next day, but at the moment I wanted nothing more than for it to eat all the way through my skin and bones until I was merely a pile of ash on the ground,
waiting patiently for the next rainfall or gust of wind to scatter any trace of my existence so I might be forgotten in the merciless flow of time.

“It’s okay, Aswuni,” the thunderous voice sang again. “You’ve done well. Don’t look so sullen.”

I did not lift my head, but the words sank in and comforted my heart, almost as if someone had reached in and given it a soft hug. It was not enough to make the shame go away, but it did cause an involuntary twitch at the corner of my mouth, threatening to wash away the hard feelings.

A hand descended upon my shoulder and gave me a short squeeze. The hand was somewhat wrinkled with liver spots scattered across the skin, but it was still strong and firm. It patted me on the back a few times, then tugged gently on my shirt as if to beckon me on to my feet.

I obeyed the hand, rising from my seated position and finally lifting my head to see an old figure, my master, standing beside me with a smile on his face. He was looking down at the wilted dandelion as though it were a piece of gold among iron scraps, or a gemstone so magnificent it would humble a king.

He opened his mouth to speak, and once again the thunder came pouring out. “I know it’s hard. You may not see it, but you are learning more every day, and you’ve come further than some men do in their entire lives. There’s no need to be impatient.”

I nodded, but was not yet ready to speak despite his encouraging words, even though I knew they were true. Even so, it was also true that I failed, and I had failed every single time. Dozens of times, over the course of months and years, and not once had I kept the flower alive. There was always too much life or too little, never close to the balance needed to spring the plant into weeks of strength and beauty, far longer than any other flower of its kind could sustain its bloom.
It was a magic I just couldn’t grasp; a power I did not have the talent to control, and more than once I convinced myself it was entirely impossible.

Yet I knew it could be done. Master Porthos himself had bloomed a wild daisy right before my eyes, and months later it was still white as a pearl, tilted lazily over the edge of a tiny glass vase in my own room. I watched him perform these small miracles countless times, whether it was growing a flower, calming a nervous animal, or even splitting bread after it grew stale. Every time I looked upon the daisy I was reminded of what wondrous power my master held, and I told myself that he too spent his entire life learning to do such a basic task. It could be done, I just hadn’t figured it out yet.

“We’ve had a pretty good day so far,” Master Porthos boomed. He arched his back and stretched his arms to the sky, and for a second I thought I could hear his joints creak. “Why don’t we head back to the temple and enjoy the rest of it while we can?” Then he laughed, chuckling out the next few words, “You can finally get started on that book I told you to finish by last month!” Even though he was standing beside me it was easy to tell that every word he spoke passed through a smile before leaving his lips through the silver hairs of his beard, almost as if his humor had been the force which shaped each syllable.

I sighed, resigning myself to my master’s infectious cheer as a smile to creep its way across my face. I shook my head, trying to clear my mind a bit, and walked over to where my white robe lay on the ground, carelessly lumped in a heap from when I took it off before meditating. I picked it up and shook it, dislodging a few dead leaves, blades of grass, and at least one grasshopper as well. Instinctively I tried to brush off the green and brown stains as well which had marked the fabric for several days now, but of course this did nothing to erase them. Still, I
always felt the same disappointment when I looked down to see they hadn’t disappeared despite my efforts. Maybe I would actually take the time to wash my robe properly when we got back.

I rolled my eyes. I knew myself better than that.

I folded the cloak and draped it over my arm. It was far too warm now to wear the extra layer, and in truth the only reason I had it at all was because the morning had been chilly and I wasn’t in the mood to shiver through it. At the time it was worth it, but now the robe was nothing more than extra weight. Not much extra weight, but still an annoyance.

I strolled over to where my master waited. He was wearing his own cloak, although his was entirely spotless aside from a few specks of mud where the cloth hung down near his feet. He was indeed a careful man in his age, but he also had enough nimble strength left in his light frame to walk through the forest without so much as stumbling over a single protruding rut or root.

We started on our way back, leaving the clearing behind and taking a small footpath through the trees only wide enough for one of us at a time. My master walked ahead of me, and my eyes watched his heels to make sure I didn’t miss any rough spots on the ground which might cause me to turn an ankle or fall. Even so, I was careful to pick my head up once in a while and gaze into the surrounding forest. Small trees, fallen branches, and growing plants scattered the surrounding woods, obscuring the forest floor and forming a sort of wall, preventing anyone from seeing past it into the undergrowth. Still, the sunlight shone down between the branches of the tallest trees and lit up the leaves and moss all around us. It was almost as if the plants themselves were glowing with the sun’s warmth, like they had absorbed so much sunshine that they had to let some of it out to keep from catching on fire.
During one such moment, when I had my head turned to the side to see a finch of some sort disappear behind the leaves of a sapling, I failed to notice my master stopping and bumped into him.

I let out a short grunt and quickly followed up with an apology. “Sorry, Master. I didn’t mean to bump you.”

Master Porthos said nothing, but his white cloak fluttered a little as he reached back and felt around for my arm before taking a firm hold of it in his hand. His face and body were still oriented down the path, and based on how tightly he gripped my arm I could only assume that some animal had crossed the trail in front of us.

I tried to peer around his side, hoping to see whatever stopped my master in his tracks, but the moment I shifted I felt his grip tighten and hold me fast. I managed to catch a short glimpse of what seemed to be the points on a set of antlers, but beyond that I could see nothing beyond my master’s white robe. Perhaps he was concerned I would spook the deer, but I had trouble finding a reason why he would be so concerned about such a thing. Either way, my master was determined to keep me from poking my head out, so there was no sense trying to put up a fight.

My master turned his head slightly to the side, clearly not taking his eyes off of the deer, but enough so that he could speak out the corner of his mouth.

“Turn around,” he whispered with a mischievous edge, although something about his tone seemed a bit off, like it wasn’t in earnest.

Even though he couldn’t see me, I raised an eyebrow. “Alright,” I said, trying my best to figure out whatever scheme my master was cooking up as I faced the direction we just came from. “Why? What are we doing?”
“When I say so,” my master began in his off-mischievous voice, “I want you to run as fast as you can, got it?”

I furled my brow, still clueless as to where this was going, or where I was going for that matter. “How far should I go?” I asked.

“As far as you can,” he said, although now the mischievous edge was fading away, and it sounded much more like he was giving me advice. He said it in the same way he might suggest I wash the dishes at the temple, but in reality I don’t have a choice. Still, running and dishes are not the same thing.

“What do you—“ I began, but was cut off almost immediately by my master.

“Now,” he hissed, practically spitting the word over his shoulder.

“Wai—“

“Damnit, Assi! I said run!” Any playfulness which once existed was gone. I felt a hard nudge on my back, causing me to stumble forward, but my feet swept underneath me just in time to keep from falling. At first I thought I struck a stone or something, since a tingling sensation started to arise in my feet, but the sensation crawled its way up my legs until it covered everything to my hips.

I almost stumbled again when I realized what it was, but I managed to keep my feet under me and sped away, back down the trail to the clearing. My eyes scanned the ground before me, taking in every root and stone just before they could catch one of my feet, and every now and then I dodged under a low branch or around an intruding tree. The tingling in my legs slowly subsided as I put distance between myself and my master, and it became harder and harder for him to help me run with his magic.

* * *

* * *
The sun had long set by the time I made it back to the temple, but the cloudless sky and a full moon provided enough light for me to work my way out of the forest and along the road which led back home.

I had run for a long time after leaving my master, past the clearing where I practiced my magic and farther still into the woods until I was lost and curled up in a small copse, too tired and sore to run or hide anyplace else. I stayed there for a long time, waiting to get my strength back or, by some miracle, for Master Porthos to appear and tell me that it was time to come out.

Part of me wanted to go back. Back through the clearing and down the path where I left him, but I could not remember the way. Eventually I picked my stiff body up off the ground and started out of the forest with only the late afternoon sun to give me any direction.

The temple itself was almost completely dark, but I could make out at least one candlelit room through a window. It wasn’t the same room as Master Porthos’, but knowing that someone was awake and not raising a terrified commotion was immensely comforting. I wasn’t sure what exactly was going to greet me when I finally returned, but anything other than utter chaos seemed like a blessing to me.

I hurried around to the back door of the temple, the one closest to where my master slept, and slipped inside as quickly as possible, opening and closing the door as quickly as I could manage to keep it from squeaking too much.

Without the light from the moon it was impossible to see, but I still managed to feel my way down the corridor, counting the number of doors I passed as my hand brushed over them. After bumping only a few tables and chair in the hall, I arrived at my master’s door and paused, not sure whether to knock or simply peek inside to see if he was asleep. I decided to make two small raps on the door, but they were so quiet I’m not sure he would have heard them if his ear was
pressed against the wood on the other side. Still, I waited to see if there was any response, perhaps a shuffle of him rolling out of bed or standing up from his chair, but no sound followed.

Gently, I lifted the latch on the door and pushed, trying to pick up the door a little at the same time to take some weight off the hinges and keep it from squeaking. The difference was minor, but I did not have to open it far to peek through the gap. A small window permitted enough moonlight to see the foot of my master’s bed, but it was enough to see that he wasn’t there. The blankets lay flat and smooth over his mattress, neat and undisturbed from when he made his bed in the morning, and there was not enough light for him to be at his desk reading or writing. I inched the door open a little farther, enough to fit a small portion of my head through, and sure enough, his desk was vacant.

I closed the door as quietly as possible, thought for a moment, and continued down the corridor towards the main hall of the temple, hoping if something actually was wrong that Master Porthos would be waiting there, assuming I’d enter in the front doors instead of sneaking around back so he could intercept me as soon as I returned.

With only a few more shuffles and bumps I managed to work my way to the main hall, where the numerous windows on either side of the room let in enough light from the night sky that I could find my way around with relative ease. Even so, I could walk around the room and checked every shadowy corner for any sign of my master. Once in a while I would see a dark object or odd shadow off to the side, but whenever I took a closer look it turned out to be nothing other than my hopeful imagination. After a few minutes of this I gave up my search, standing in the middle of the hall with a crease in my brow, biting my lip in concentration.

*Where could Master Porthos be?* That was the extent to which I could think in the moment, and finally it dawned on me; the chance he still hadn’t made his way back to the temple.
I shook the thought out of my head and left the hall, walking briskly to the Master Hemburr’s room. His window was still lit with the tiny flicker of a candle when I passed by outside, so if anyone knew whether or not Master Porthos was back in the temple or not it would be him.

There was still a gentle glow beneath Master Hemburr’s door, although it was so faint that I almost walked right past it. I gave a few light knocks this time, harder than I had on Master Porthos’ door, and when no response came I knocked a little harder still, careful not to be too loud and wake the other masters in adjacent rooms. Once again there was no response, and once again I was forced to open the door and peek inside.

This time I could clearly see a figure in the room, wearing a white robe and sprawled across his desk, lit by the dim light of a candle on the verge of burning out. An open inkwell was perched on the corner of the desk, although the lid had fallen onto the flood at some point during the night. Master Hemburr himself must have fallen asleep while writing at his desk, which was by no means unusual. The man was brilliant, spending much of his time scrawling away inside his own room, and falling asleep all over his work was one hazard of such a lifestyle.

I debated shutting the door, heading back to my own room, and trying to sleep until the next morning where I could resolve the issue with a clear head, but at the same time I felt inclined to put out the candle and help him to bed. Besides, the thought of Master Porthos had driven me to this point already, and if Master Hemburr happened to wake up while I helped him move I would have the perfect opportunity to say something.

The door had recently been oiled, opening with hardly a whisper of sound, and I made no effort to quiet my footsteps as I worked my way over to his desk. I picked up the fallen lid from the floor first, replacing it atop the inkwell, and turned to his hands trying to locate the quill. Curiously, though, his hands were empty, but I did notice several of his fingers had been stained
black by the ink. Not stained in the way a scribe’s hands might be after months of the excess fluid on the quill might eventually smudge their fingers, but stained as though he had intentionally dipped his fingers into the jar. As I looked more closely I could see smudges along the surface of his desk as well, tracing a somewhat abstract trail where his fingers had been before reaching their current position.

I let out a shallow grunt, patted Master Hemburr on the back, and prodded his shoulders in an attempt to rouse him, but he was so far gone that there wasn’t so much as a grumble in his sleep. Eventually I grabbed him by the shoulders and pulled him upright in his chair, causing his hands to slide stiffly across the desk and leave a few more glossy smudges, yet somehow his head still bobbed downwards without him stirring.

Frustrated by this point, I flicked Master Hemburr on the cheek. I was eager to learn whether or not Master Porthos had come back or not, determined to find out exactly what he knew. But the instant I touched him I recoiled at the shock of his cold, clammy skin.

* * *

A thick layer of clouds hid the sun, every once in a while threatening to sprinkle small mists of rain along with intermittent breezes fluttering the loose folds of my robe. I could still see the brown and green stains around the bottom as I kicked an acorn back and forth between my feet in an effort to distract myself from everything that happened in the past few days. The cold stone steps on which I sat drained the energy from my legs, but as they were tired and sore anyway it was of little consequence. Beside me sat a book I had brought out from my room, the one Master Porthos told me to finish before spring arrived, but for some reason I could not muster the motivation to open it. It lay unopened, the brown leather cover looking as though it had been freshly bound a month ago. Part of me truly wanted to read the book, as if finishing it would
somehow reset the world and bring everyone back, but the rest of me knew how ridiculous the notion was.

I shook my head, trying to force away the thought before the image had a chance to overwhelm my mind. The past three nights I had broken down in my room and cried, unable to find any sort of comfort, digging my freshly blistered fingers into the thin pillow, virtually tearing it to shreds. Each time I only fell asleep after exhausting myself with tears as the faces of everyone I cared about danced across the blurry surface of my eyes.

I snapped back to reality when I accidentally kicked the acorn a little too fast, and in my haste to keep it from bouncing away I crushed it beneath my foot. The light flesh of the seed emerged between the dark cracks of its shell, and on some impulse I picked up the seed and pulled away the rest of its husk before nibbling on the inside. It wasn’t the first time I had eaten an acorn, but the bitter taste still did not appeal to me in any great way. It was still enough to take my mind away from such dark thoughts, so I continued to gnaw away at the nut despite the bitter taste and fact I did not even possess any hunger. Part of my even wished there were more around for me to eat, just to kill a few more haunting minutes of the day.

But alas, I swallowed the last morsel and looked up at the sky where the gray blanket held the warmth of the sun at bay. Even though the clouds formed one impenetrable layer, it was still easy to watch them drift across the sky, passing over treetops. For a moment I considered how slowly time seemed to flow in the clouds, as though each passing hour here was nothing longer than a minute to up there. It seemed so strange, how different the earth was from the heavens even though they were so closely connected. There was so much going on down here and so little up there, with forests and oceans and cities filled with people compared to the aimless drifting
and occasional storm. The world was unpredictable, but the sky, even during a storm, possessed some measure of consistency; an elegant simplicity that could not be found on solid ground.

I huffed and closed my eyes, almost embarrassed at how silly the thought was. It was so easy to simplify the heavens when I had only seen it from the earth. I had no doubt my thoughts would be different, if not the complete opposite, if I were up there looking down instead.

With a sigh I reached down and grabbed the book, opening it up to where I had left off at some point several weeks ago, reading over the first few lines to refresh my memory. While reading them over did elicit some vague sense of familiarity, I still couldn’t piece together what exactly the words meant, or what they were in relation to. I flipped back one page, trying to spark something in my mind, but again I could not place any of it among the thoughts in my head. One more page back and still nothing made sense, so I decided I must have been in a stupor when reading through the first time. I ran one hand over the top of my head then slapped myself lightly across the cheek, punishing myself for being so careless. The only bright side was that I hadn’t read very far into the book yet, so instead I closed it and opened the cover to the first page, reading the bold flowing script in which the title was penned:

PROPERTIES AND PROPER USE OF CIRCUMAMBIENT THAUMATURGICAL ENERGY

Master Porthos

A dark thought flashed through my head as I read those first words. *Is this book the only thing I have left?* I paused for a moment but quickly shoved the thought aside. It would only remind me of the pain regardless of whether it was true or not. The only thing I knew for certain
was that I held the book in my hands and that reading it was exactly what my master would tell me to do. It had only been three days, but already it was nearly impossible for me to focus enough on my meditation without my master’s voice to guide me. In the few cases I had tried, my mind latched on to some irrelevant idea, dragging my imagination into it and causing a massive mental mess. Worse, I would start to think about the masters. After failing to push aside such images for just a few minutes I would resign and move on to something else. Without Master Porthos, any form of practice was in vain, which I suppose is what finally drove me to pick up his book, in hopes that it might help me finish what he had started teaching me.

I turned to the first page, marveling at how carefully my master had filled out the sheets. Each line was perfectly spaced, and every letter was crisp and confident. I thought about whether or not he used magic to help make the words come out so well, but while I was sure doing so would be a simple task for him, it would also have been just as easy for Master Porthos to write the whole book by hand.

*Damnit,* I thought, and rolled my eyes, angry at how easily I allowed myself to be distracted once again. The past couple days had been so empty except when I ate, slept, or found some small project to tinker with, but even after all that there was so much time in the day. Time I should have used to do something but hadn’t.

I held the book up close to my face, trying to block out the sight of anything around me, and stared intently at the words, working over them methodically as though I intended to commit each letter to memory the moment my eyes passed over its mark on the page, sometimes reading the same line five or six times just to grasp its meaning.

For ten minutes or so I kept this up before a faint rumble caught my ear. At first I wasn’t sure if it was just my imagination finding an excuse to put the book down, but as I held my breath and
concentrated I could tell that there was definitely a sound coming from somewhere down the road that lead to the temple.

I clapped the book shut and jumped to my feet, walking briskly to see what it was I heard. I felt a hopeful surge in my chest that somehow I would see the masters, that everything had been one cruel nightmare from which I had just awoken, but at the same time I fought to suppress the feeling, knowing that the pain from losing that hope might hurt just as much as the night I returned to the temple. Even so, I could not help but notice the butterflies flocking in my stomach, and I knew there was little I could do to keep from getting ahead of myself.

* * *

I kept walking down the road, and it was not long at all before I saw the source of the noise. A cart, pulled by a single donkey, was rolling its way toward the temple, packed with sacks and crates behind a man in a plain brown shirt which sported at least one or two rips and patches. Squinting my eyes I could make out long black hair and a short beard, and in that moment I could feel the butterflies drop to the pit of my stomach, almost bringing me down to my knees.

The man in the cart was no master. He was a merchant who frequently travelled through a nearby town and often visited the temple, trading what goods he had for favors from the masters such as sharpening knives or restoring spoiled food to good condition. The deal was much more in our favor to be honest, but the merchant was probably just trying to be charitable, so neither party ever brought up the discrepancy. I myself had only spoken to him on a few previous exchanges, but it was never more than a kind greeting and a few polite words. I was neither the one receiving the supplies nor one capable of the same services the masters were, so the merchant and I had never needed to interact beyond that measure.
The man slowly drew up to where I stood and stopped the cart, peering down at me with tired eyes over a slightly crooked nose from his seat.

“You look familiar, boy,” he said as a slight smile formed on his lips. “Your name’s Marcus, isn’t it?”

I couldn’t stop a slight grimace from tugging at the corners of my mouth at the thought of a particular stony mound behind the temple, somewhat smaller than the others, but I bit my lip before my emotions had a chance to take over. “No sir. My name is Aswuni.” I could see the slight embarrassment on his face and quickly added, “Don’t worry about it. We haven’t talked much before.”

He relaxed at this, and thankfully seemed to miss the initial twitch from my face as well. “Well, my apologies, young Master Aswuni.”

I could tell his words were genuine, but I still wanted to clap my hands over my ears and shout out that I was not a master. That there were no masters here at all, but I managed to simply blink and bite down a little harder on my lip.

The merchant did not seem to notice and continued his thought, “Are any of the monks free at the moment, or do I need to wait for a while?” He absent-mindedly reached up to scratch his beard and glanced towards the temple as if expecting someone walk out at any moment.

I froze, unable to stop myself from gaping. I could feel the blood rush to my face, clogging up my nose even as my eyes began to blur. I ducked my head, trying desperately to hide my face before he noticed what was happening, and took two long breaths, hoping to distract myself with the inward rush of cool air.

“I’m sorry,” I began, picking my head back up and blinking several times, “the masters aren’t here. I’m... it’s just me.” I could not bring myself to look the man in the eye as I spoke.
The merchant cocked his head, staring down his nose while I averted my gaze, probably trying to decipher whether I was lying to him or not. I had no reason to mislead him, but he had no reason to believe every single master was conveniently away from the temple either. He raised an arm to scratch the back of his neck and squinted, watching me for what felt like ages, but finally he broke the silence.

“It’s been a hell of a day already, and I need to be on my way before it starts to rain. Would you terribly mind taking me to them?”

Before I had a chance to respond, the merchant stood up and jumped down from his cart. He walked up to the donkey and, grabbing its bridle, led the creature to a nearby tree and tied the reins to a branch, then went back to the cart and pulled out a dark wine bottle.

“I was hoping to share a drink with Master Hemburr as well,” the merchant continued, and started walking towards the temple doors. “It would be terrific if you could show me where he is.”

I wanted to shout at him. I wanted to knock the bottle out of his hands and scream for him to go away; to yell that the Master Hemburr and Master Porthos and all the others were gone and that there was no reason for him to be here. I wanted him to stop talking as though nothing was out of the ordinary.

“Stop,” I murmured, just loud enough for him to hear. The merchant paused and looked over his shoulder, raising his eyebrows in my direction. “Follow me. I’ll show you.” My voice tapered off to the point where I don’t know whether he heard my last words or not, but I hung my head and walked past him to the side of the temple. I did not bother to check that he was following me, watching my feet instead as they swung heavily over the grass with each step I took. I did
not pick my head up when I turned the corner behind the building either, knowing I would not be able to hold my composure if I did.

I heard the merchant shuffle up beside me and stop, just before there a thud as the wine bottle hit the grass and bounced into my field of view.

“Dear gods,” the merchant whispered. His voice was enough to show how dumbstruck he was, trying to process the sight before him. “How did this happen?”

“I don’t know,” I choked out as my legs started to wobble beneath me, and I sank to the ground, glancing up just long enough to see the neat line of long stone cairns before me. The onslaught of tears would not be quenched this time, and my entire body convulsed as I gasped for breath between sobs and buried my face in my hands. The salt from my tears stung the sores on my palms; the sores I received when building each of those cairn in the past few days. Perhaps they burned simply from the memory, or perhaps they burned to help me forget.

I did not forget. I wept, I gasped, and I shut away the world as best I could.

“I don’t know!”
Writing Fantasy

Part Two: The Experience

Ethan Childs
PROCESS

In all forms of non-fiction writing, and in most forms of fiction for that matter, the author must create or relay a story which is (or is conceivably) possible in the real world. Fantasy writing, however, is not grounded in the physically possible. The fantasy writer must work with the impossible, and they must do so in such a way that the reader believes it, at least for a time, to be absolutely real and true. The author must defy all common sense, and do so with such subtly that their audience never realizes they are being manipulated.

This is not easy, and it is the first challenge I faced creating this piece.

Even before I started my first draft, I needed to devise the circumstances in which my world operates. This included culture, landscape, time period, etc., but especially how magic would present itself. While it may seem like a simple matter—a man uses magic to set a tree branch on fire—trying to find a way to include these impossible events is actually tremendously difficult because of all the problems it poses in creating a “real” world.

Magic must have some sort of limitations, otherwise the man could simply set everything on fire and be done with it, but what kind of limitations make sense? Is there a limit to the number of times he can do this? How hot is the fire? Can he produce fire anywhere? If so, why doesn’t he just set all his enemies on fire from the inside, and if not, what prevents him from doing so? When I first started this project, I had a fairly good idea for how magic functions—or at least I thought I did. Magic would be the conversion of mental energy (in other words, emotion) to power. In order to do this, a person would need complete mental control—something which is virtually unachievable for most—and converting their emotions to magical power would cause those emotions to dissipate, preventing anyone from using magic to any great extent for any
significant length of time. This might seem reasonable on the surface, but even this explanation doesn’t quite make sense because it doesn’t explain what gives emotions their magical power. This led me to the creation of the “soul,” which served as both a physical and magical framework on which humans are made, and explained where magic within people comes from. The new problem was that warping or using someone’s soul in any way would theoretically cause their bodies and minds to break down as well, and there is also a question about whether or not that means animals might have some innate magical potential. Thus the cycle of creating rules and discovering loopholes continued indefinitely. The end result was that, when I began this story, I was working with a broken system which desperately needed to be simplified and repaired; something which would come back to haunt me much later…

Despite this, I finally began work on my first draft, and after lots of careful thought and planning, I produced half a page of mediocre writing about a young man with a headache carving intricate designs into a table. Before I had written so much as a single page I had encountered another significant roadblock, which is where the story should begin.

I should say now that most stories have at least two beginnings, often more. The first is on page one, where the reader sees the initial words on the paper, and the second occurs later where the plot is kicked into motion. For example, The Name of the Wind, by Patrick Rothfuss, arguably has several different beginnings—there is even a section where the main character discusses where exactly he should begin telling his story:

“In some ways, it began when I heard her singing. Her voice twinning, mixing with my own. Her voice was like a portrait of her soul: wild as a fire, sharp as shattered glass, sweet and clean as clover.”

Kvothe shook his head. “No. It began at the University. I went to learn magic of the sort they talk about in stories. Magic like Taborlin the Great. I wanted to learn the name of the wind. I wanted fire and lightning. I wanted answers to ten thousand questions and access to their archives. But what I found at the University was much different than a story, and I was much dismayed.
“But I expect the true beginning lies in what led me to the University. Unexpected fires at twilight. A man with eyes like ice at the bottom of a well. The smell of blood and burning hair. The Chandrian.” He nodded to himself. “Yes. I suppose that is where it all begins. This is, in many ways, a story about the Chandrian.”

Kvothe shook his head, as if to free himself from some dark thought. “But I suppose I must go even further back than that. If this is to be something resembling my book of deeds, I can spare the time. It will be worth it if I am remembered, if not flatteringly, then at least with some small amount of accuracy.

“But what would my father say if he heard me telling a story this way? ‘Begin at the beginning.’ Very well, if we are to have a telling, let’s make it a proper one.”

Kvothe sat forward in his chair.

“In the beginning, as far as I know, the world was spun out of the nameless void by Aleph, who gave everything a name. Or, depending on the version of the tale, found the names all things already possessed.”

(Rothfuss, 52)

Each of these moments can be identified over the course of the book, and each one sets the story off in such a significant way that it could be seen as the real beginning of the story. Even by this segment, six chapters and fifty-two pages have gone by before the story really picks up, and those other beginnings do not even enter the story for another sixty, one hundred fifty, or even three hundred pages! (My personal belief is that the story begins exactly on page sixty-one when Kvothe witnesses a man call the wind.) Regardless of which event the reader interprets as the true beginning of the story, the first page is almost never one of them, and Rothfuss could have started from any one of those points when he first set out to write the book if he chose to.

This brings me back to the young man with a headache, carving designs into a table, and stopping before I reached a full page of text. At this point I still had not decided where to start my own writing; which beginning I would choose to work from. As such, I abandoned the first draft and took some time to consider the entire story before selecting which portion I would tackle first.
Now I am up to my second draft, and my goal is still to figure out where and how to begin. I finally settled on the “second beginning,” meaning I would start writing from the point where the plot first takes off, rather than from the theoretical first page. I made some adjustments to the main character, and started in the workshop once again. As the scene unravels, the character hears warning bells in the town and boards up the door to the workshop. After a time, he goes to look outside, but in that moment he is attacked by an unfamiliar yet vaguely human creature. His father walks in, is attacked by the creature himself, and then the building collapses unexpectedly. The scene ends with the main character emerging from the wreckage, finding his father dead, and the creature nowhere to be found.

Enter roadblock number three: the antagonist.

Once again, the antagonist might seem like a simple matter. There’s a bad person doing bad things, and the good person needs to stop them, right? Not right. Not right at all. The antagonist, in many ways, is the most important character in the whole story, and sometimes is possessed of the highest set of ideals as well. The antagonist must be every bit as thought-out and believable as the main character, and they must be composed in such a way that the reader understands what drove them to such extremes, and ideally can sympathize with them as well. Put another way, if the antagonist wakes up at five thirty every morning, sits up in bed, and proclaims, “Today I shall undertake great evils!” the story is guaranteed to fall flat. The antagonist needs an authentic reason to get up in the morning, or else there is nothing to draw him or her into conflict with the protagonist. John Gardner, in his book, The Art of Fiction, highlights this essential connection:

…we must be shown dramatically why each character believes what he does and why each cannot sympathize with the values of his antagonist; and we must be shown dramatically why the conflicting characters cannot or do not simply avoid each other, as in real life even tigers ordinarily do.

(Gardner, 171-172)
To use another example from Rothfuss’ book, the primary antagonist—an ancient man named Haliax—was once a noble warrior who, after a heart wrenching turn of events, is cursed with immortality and forever separated from the woman he loves. Any “evil” deeds committed by this shadowy figure all serve the purpose of bringing him closer with his lost love, and so the audience sympathizes with him. One of these evil deeds, however, includes murdering Kvothe’s (the main character’s) parents when he was very young. As such, both the protagonist and the antagonist are compelling and believable characters, yet the reader also understands what exactly causes them to clash with each other. This interaction is what ultimately allows the story to grow and develop in a believable and engaging way.

To relate this back to my story, I had not yet settled on an antagonist. I already decided the strange creature was nothing more than a minion of sorts, so I needed someone or something to fill the void and introduce a real conflict. Furthermore, I needed to decide why they were at odds with the protagonist (or vice versa), and what exactly they hoped to gain. I struggled with this for a long time, but eventually decided to overlook it and get on with the story. Yet another thing which would come back to haunt me…

At this point I had begun my story twice and ultimately made very little progress. The next four drafts I produced all starred (essentially) the same main character, although each time he was placed in a different setting with a different action. I did make some minor adjustments to the character and/or plot for each, but none of it stuck at this point. Two of the drafts even included the antagonist, but working him into the story still did not help me figure out his true intentions—although I hear this often is an effective method. Along the way I noticed some technical issues with my writing as well, such as voice, description, how I conveyed emotion, etc., but compared to the overarching problem of not being able to form a cohesive story, these
were all minor. The real issue is that I was dealing with a broken magical system and characters who lacked authentic motivation. Without both of those components, creating a compelling and high-quality piece of fantasy is absolutely impossible.

Enter Aswuni.

Aswuni originally had no relation to this project at all. In fact, Aswuni came from a short story I wrote for a different class about a necromancer who faces off against a tyrannical king, and uses the judgment of the dead to change the king’s ways. At the moment I was struggling so much with my own story, and so much time had passed, that I faced a difficult decision: do I continue with the struggling story which I have spent so much time and effort on, or do I abandon my work and start fresh with this new character? As you already know, I chose the latter.

Making this decision did not, in and of itself, solve the problems I was having. I still needed to devise an appropriate antagonist, and I had to rethink all the mechanisms for magic. The upside was that I was no longer bound to my previous ideas, and I had learned that these things must be considered thoroughly in order for any story to begin properly. Despite this, I moved forward with my next draft before carefully considering these elements, and even though writing a story about a necromancer was engaging and exciting, I realized immediately that even Aswuni would need to undergo big changes before the story could progress. This time I took a huge step back and reconsidered both magic and my antagonist.

Allow me to summarize both.

After many hours of consideration and deliberation, I settled on a way to include magic without too many issues. In short, this new magic is very similar to the Force from *Star Wars*, but a properly trained individual can manipulate the magical energy in the surrounding world to
do absolutely anything they desire, provided there is enough “circumambient thaumaturgical energy,” and they have the skill. In order to channel this energy, an individual must enter a deep meditative state to the point where their consciousness essentially fuses with their environment, allowing them to redirect said energy. Thus, magic is largely impractical for the average person, and it prevents anyone from harnessing too much power at any given time. There is also a second, “secret” type of magic known as “soul magic,” in which the individual converts’ part of their own soul into power, but this becomes fairly complicated. The general idea is that anyone who learns to use this power can make a lot of things go boom, but at a steep price.

As for the antagonist, this gave me quite a lot of trouble. How do I create a compelling, non-cliché character to oppose the protagonist? Where do I start? Once again, John Gardner comes in with some advice:

—since all human beings have the same root experience (we’re born, we suffer, we die, to put it grimly), so that all we need for our sympathy to be roused is that the writer communicate with power and conviction the similarities in his characters’ experience and our own—

(Gardner, 43)

I do not want to delve into character too much at this time, but the general idea is that the reader connects with characters because they can make connections to their own life. Therefore, rather than create an antagonist and find out what motivates them, I decided to pick a motivation, something which every reader can relate to, and design a protagonist centered around that idea. After some finagling I settled on the feeling of loneliness, and created a god, who, after countless millennia existing without a close companion, wishes to become mortal. This lonely nature finally allowed me to craft a convincing antagonist, even though it only makes a brief appearance in this segment (the antler Aswuni catches a glimpse of). Spoiler alert: the god is responsible for killing the Masters at the temple.
It took me ten drafts, but I finally arrived at a place where I could begin my story. Now it was time to learn the more intricate aspects of writing.

**SETTING**

A good lie—as all works of fantasy are indeed lies—depends on the details. This can be someone’s reaction, their appearance, the weather, time of day, etc., but regardless of the situation, these small bits and pieces help meld everything else together. What is fascinating about setting, though, is that its importance to the story can range between crucial and trivial from one scene to the next. Unlike plot or character, there are times in the story when setting can be virtually disregarded.

This may seem strange, but out of the three major components to a story (plot, setting, and character), setting is the only one whose main objective is to augment the other two. This means that the purpose of setting is not to drive the story forward, but to make the trip more scenic and interesting as the reader moves along. It is also an area in which I struggle, because my habit is to always describe a character’s surroundings thoroughly, even though it might not add any real substance.

The trick with setting is to figure out how much should be included at any given time. Because setting constitutes the extra details which help flush out the scene, the number of details included greatly affects the pace of the story. If the plot is going through a state of low action—possibly proceeding a miniature climax—then often times it is better for the author to include fewer setting details so that the pace of the story is not significantly interrupted. Alternatively, if the plot is in a state of high action, or is leading to a state of high action, then including more
information about the surroundings will help slow the pace down and build suspense, increasing the dramatic effect for the reader. This can be seen in two separate chapters of *The Name of the Wind*, the first shortly after a miniature climax, the second just before one:

Lunch was a bowl of steaming-hot potato soup, beans, narrow rashers of fatty bacon, and fresh brown bread. The room’s large plank tables were nearly half full, seating about two hundred students. The room was full of the low murmur of conversation, punctuated by laughter and the metallic sound of spoons and forks scraping against the tin trays.

(Rothfuss, 241)

Usually I worked nights in the Fishery. It was a different place in the mornings. There were only fifteen or twenty people there pursuing their individual projects. In the evenings there were usually twice that many. Kilvin was in his office, as always, but the atmosphere was more relaxed: busy, but not bustling.

I even saw Fela off in the corner of the shop, chipping carefully away at a piece of obsidian the size of a large loaf of bread. Small wonder I’d never seen her here before if she made a habit of being in the shop this early.

... I gathered the necessary tools and set up in one of the fume hoods along the eastern wall. I chose a place near a drench, one of the five-hundred-gallon tanks of twice-tough glass that were spaced throughout the workshop. If you spilled something dangerous on yourself while working in the hoods, you could simply pull the drench’s handle and rinse yourself clean in a stream of cool water.

(Rothfuss, 446)

The second example actually goes on to include even more details as the scene unfolds, but even this segment alone is enough to highlight the drastic difference between the two descriptions. As I said before, the first excerpt is shortly after a miniature climax, and the second is immediately preceding one. By controlling the amount of description and including only the details which are—or will be—important to the scene, Rothfuss is able to move the less interesting segments of the story more quickly while building suspense and drawing out the more interesting bits.
My own piece does not, unfortunately, have any fast-moving areas in which some detail may be easily eschewed for the sake of flow, but I did make significant changes to the opening scene for precisely this reason. Here is the original opening paragraph to the story:

The sky was clear. There were no clouds, the sun was high overhead, and the air was completely still. Not a single leaf flickered on the nearby oaks, and aside from occasional bird calls and squirrels chewing their way through nuts, there was not a sound to be heard.

Now compare to the final draft:

The sky was nothing other than a rich blue expanse, stretching endlessly in every direction until the pale light of the horizon dulled its color as it sank beneath the treetops. The divine light of the sun forced all watchful eyes to avert their gaze or seek to hide their faces in shade. Just looking up to the heavens was enough to impress the stillness of the world into the heart of every creature that poked its head out from under the leaves sprouting from reborn trees or rocks which scattered the soft earth beneath their canopy. The air was so still that the slightest whisper of a passing angel would sing out across the roots and grass to every ear that stopped but a moment to listen. Not a single leaf flickered on the nearby oaks, and not a sound could be heard aside from occasional bird calls and squirrels chewing their way through nuts finally thawed after months buried beneath the ground.

The goal for this opening scene was to invoke quietness and calm within the reader. While the original draft did include the same essential imagery, the description was far too short to have the desired impact because it did not set a gentle, methodical pace. By expanding on this section for the final draft, I was able to control the flow of action to a greater degree. This means that the speed at which the story flows during the exposition helps to (hopefully) invoke the same tranquil feeling in the reader that is reflected on the page. In this way I am not only able to describe the scene in a vivid and effective manner, but I can also control the reader’s state of mind so they will interpret the unfolding events precisely how I want them to.
While this attention to pace and detail allows an author to have tremendous control over the reader, it must also be noted that setting does, at times, have a very significant impact on plot and character as well.

The impact on plot is fairly straightforward, and such applications of setting usually emerge in the form of symbolism or foreshadowing. This can be seen in my own writing as the candlelit window, which later leads to Aswuni entering the room of Master Hemburr and finding him dead, or in the segment of Rothfuss’ work I highlighted above when he describes the “drench.” This object plays a significant role in how that particular scene plays out, and so it was necessary for him to include it. There are also objects which make repeated appearances or serve some symbolic sense, such as the moon in *The Name of the Wind* and its sequel, *The Wise Man’s Fear*. Ultimately these details affect the plot in much the same way as foreshadowing, but they can also influence the reader’s interpretation of the story. Thus, plot and setting are closely related at times, but their interaction is generally a very simple one.

Character and setting, however, is a much more interesting matter. While an author might choose to spend time describing a character or their emotions, the same information may be conveyed much more subtly through the use of setting. For example, “If the first time our hero meets a given character it occurs in a graveyard, the character's next appearance will carry with it some residue of the graveyard setting” (Gardner, 192). By carefully controlling the setting in which certain characters are introduced or interact, the audience will immediately form associations which will affect their perspective and understanding of that character for the rest of the story. This relation between character and setting is the reason why my story begins in such a calm and pleasant way, because the reader forms an association between the character’s
surroundings and their intrinsic traits. In other words, introducing my main character in such a way causes the reader to associate him with the surrounding calm and tranquility.

The setting can also help set the mood and prepare the reader to interpret the character’s state of mind in much the same way. The difference here is that the reader already knows the character very well, but their surroundings at any particular moment can invoke associations within the reader that influence their interpretation of the scene. For example, if the author describes a spooky setting, such as a country road running through a forest, shrouded in fog, and lit only by the scant light of a crescent moon, then the reader will instill that spooky feeling on to the character. I used this in my own story to help set the mood in the scene where Aswuni is kicking an acorn back and forth with his feet. Originally, this scene began with exactly that image, but only contained a few details to help highlight his feeling of helplessness.

The final revised version of this included many more details, invoking a more potent feeling within the reader.

A thick layer of clouds hid the sun, every once in a while threatening to sprinkle small mists of rain along with intermittent breezes fluttering the loose folds of my robe. I could still see the brown and green stains around the bottom as I kicked an acorn back and forth between my feet in an effort to distract myself from everything that happened in the past few days. The cold stone steps on which I sat drained the energy from my legs, but as they were tired and sore anyway it was of little consequence. Beside me sat a book I had brought out from my room, the one Master Porthos told me to finish before spring arrived, but for some reason I could not muster the motivation to open it. It lay unopened, the brown leather cover looking as though it had been freshly bound a month ago.
By starting off with a description of the dark sky and occasional breezes, I am able to conjure up any associations the reader might have with being outside in such a situation. These associations help the reader to engage in the dismal and dreary setting, and all of the details after this help to punctuate that feeling. In doing so, the reader assimilates their own personal feelings with those of Aswuni. Thus, even though the only internal description of Aswuni I provide is that he lacks the motivation to open his book, I am still able to convey the helpless, empty feeling within the character.

Even though setting does not always play a big role in the story, it is still important for the author to consider its use at all times. A properly executed setting can make or break a scene, or drastically alter the story’s flow. This also means that the improper use of setting can throw the reader off, confuse them, or distract them from the manner in which the story is progressing.

**CHARACTER**

Character is the life blood of every good story. Character drives the story, makes the story believable, and is the vehicle by which the reader engages with the story. Because of this, character is probably the single most important component, regardless of genre. Even if the plot is slow or lacking energy, or if the setting is not up to snuff, a well-executed character can engage the reader enough to guide them through from beginning to end.

As I discussed with setting, a lot of information about a character may be conveyed without directly referencing them, and in some cases such description can be even more insightful about the individual. Using the setting as a way to describe character is also quite useful, because the author wants to be as concise as possible when introducing someone new to the story. In general,
the writer does not want to include any information which is not entirely important, so unless a
color character plays a significant role they will not receive much detail on the page. Even if the
color character happens to be significant, the description they receive is usually still quite compact,
because much of the important information is communicated through their behavior as opposed
to their appearance. In addition to all this, the amount of time spent describing a character’s
actual physical appearance is generally minimal, and often only takes up one or two lines
regardless of who the character is. Of course, there are exceptions, but for the most part
characters do not receive long flowing passages of description the moment they appear in the
story. This excerpt, from *The Name of the Wind*, is one of the longest dedicated segments of
description for a single character in the book, and while this may seem contrary to what I just
said, it does a good job of highlighting the various methods by which Rothfuss is able to convey
color character:

Abenthy was the first arcanist I ever met, a strange, exciting figure to a young boy. He was knowledgeable in all the sciences: botany, astronomy, psychology, anatomy, alchemy, geology, chemistry.…

He was portly, with twinkling eyes that moved quickly from one thing to another. He had a strip of dark grey hair running around the back of his head, but (and this is what I remember most about him) no eyebrows. Rather, he had them, but they were in a perpetual state of regrowing from being burned off in the course of his alchemical pursuits. It made him look surprised and quizzical all at once.

He spoke gently, laughed often, and never exercised his wit at the expense of others. He cursed like a drunken sailor with a broken leg, but only at his donkeys. They were called Alpha and Beta, and Abenthy fed them carrots and lumps of sugar when he thought no one was looking. Chemistry was his particular love, and my father said he’d never known a man to run a better still.

By his second day in our troupe I was making a habit of riding in his wagon. I would ask him questions and he would answer. Then he would ask for songs and I would pluck them out for him on a lute I borrowed from my father’s wagon.

He would even sing from time to time. He had a bright, reckless tenor that was always wandering off, looking for notes in the wrong places. More often than not he stopped and laughed at himself when it happened. He was a good man, and there was no conceit in him.

(Rothfuss, 65)
It should be noted that, while this entire segment is devoted to a single character, the manner in which he is described varies throughout. For instance, the first paragraph simply rattles off a few facts about the man (Abenthy), which are significant but need no elaboration. The second paragraph is the only one which actually describes Abenthy’s physical appearance, and is limited to four simple sentences—although a simple sentence may still be interesting. While these four sentences do provide the reader with a good image to work from, it is entirely possible for every person who reads the book to imagine Abenthy differently. It is not important for Rothfuss to be so precise that every reader imagines the same exact character. All he must do is provide just enough information for the audience to see Abenthy as distinct from other characters, and that we associate him with any schema we might have related to his appearance.

The next three paragraphs do not list off facts or details of his physique, but rather convey his character by showing how he behaves under certain circumstances. The audience also gets a feel for the various mannerisms this character employs, such as cursing at donkeys and feeding them sugar when nobody is watching. Such details are far more important than appearance itself, because the mannerisms and behaviors are what give characters their character! Perhaps a more elegant wording is to say that characters—and people in general—are more accurately defined by their interactions with the world and other individuals than by their appearance alone.

These interactions are also what makes the character so compelling, because the reader can put themselves in the character’s shoes and gain a better understanding of who they are. John Gardner puts this a different way by saying, “The writer must enable us to see and feel vividly what his characters see and feel; that is, enable us to experience as directly and intensely as possible, though vicariously, what his characters experience” (Gardner, 44). The essential idea is that the best way to communicate character to the reader is to place them into situations which
the audience can relate to and then describe how they behave. For example, if the author simply
writes, “Suzy was terrified,” the reader would not experience the same feeling of terror that Suzy
feels, and would thus be less engaged with the characters and actions in that moment. It is much
better to describe the character’s reaction to a situation and use the reader’s ability to empathize
with the character in order to communicate the feeling of fear. Aswuni is in a very similar
situation in my own piece, although his feelings are more of confusion and mild panic, which is
something I worked into the piece during my revisions. Observe the original passage:

“When I say so,” my master whispered, turning his head just to the side so
that he would not have to look away from whatever he saw, “you run. Run as fast
as you can until you escape the woods. Then you must get back to the temple.”
The soft rumble of his voice had changed from before. He did not sound
afraid, nor would I say he was nervous, but something was different. No longer
were his words the purring of a thunderstorm, but rather the honest words of an
old man’s wish.
Even though my Master did not show fear, the earnestness with which he told
me to run drove deep into my chest. Whatever his reason, I was resolved to do
exactly that which he said.
“Go,” he commanded, and although he did not shout the word was crisp and
irrefutable.
He let go of my arm, and I bolted.

Now pay attention to the difference in language in the revised version:

My master turned his head slightly to the side, clearly not taking his eyes off
of the deer, but enough so that he could speak out the corner of his mouth.
“Turn around,” he whispered with a mischievous edge, although something
about his tone seemed a bit off, like it wasn’t in earnest.
Even though he couldn’t see me, I raised an eyebrow. “Alright,” I said, trying
my best to figure out whatever scheme my master was cooking up as I faced the
direction we just came from. “Why? What are we doing?”
“When I say so,” my master began in his off-mischievous voice, “I want you
to run as fast as you can, got it?”
I furled my brow, still clueless as to where this was going, or where I was
going for that matter. “How far should I go?” I asked.
“As far as you can,” he said, although now the mischievous edge was fading
away, and it sounded much more like he was giving me advice. He said it in the
same way he might suggest I wash the dishes at the temple, but in reality I don’t
have a choice. Still, running and dishes are not the same thing.
“What do you—— “ I began, but was cut off almost immediately by my master.
“Now,” he hissed, practically spitting the word over his shoulder.
“Wai—“
“Damnit, Assi! I said run!” Any playfulness which once existed was gone.

While I am guilty of outright saying that Aswuni is clueless at one point, the revised passage includes many more physical and verbal responses on Aswuni’s part which help to distinguish his confusion and discomfort. Probably the best example of this is the inclusion of his eyebrows, specifically when he chooses to raise them or furrow them. This simple description is far more compelling than simply stating his confusion, because it allows the reader to visualize the action. There’s even a chance the reader might furrow their own eyebrows, but either way the simple motion has certain connotations and connections which the audience can’t help but establish. The result is that the reader has a better mental image of the scene, and because they can put themselves in the character’s shoes they will also be more compelled to believe that Aswuni is authentically confused and somewhat concerned.

In addition to the physicality of it, the dialogue and tone (dialogue tags) also helps to portray character. In the above scene I made a distinct change in how I described Master Porthos’ voice from the original version, as well as the actual words he uses. The main distinction is that there is much more emphasis on how his voices changes after the revision. While the voice itself in the original version might be fine, by actually attaching the change in his voice to specific lines I can do a much better job demonstrating how tension is rising within the character. In much the same way that Aswuni’s confusion comes through via action, Master Porthos’ concern comes through by means of the tone he uses with each word he says.

Voice can do more than simply demonstrate how a character reacts in their given situation, though. The actual manner in which they talk can speak volumes about who they are (pun entirely intended). This can be done in many ways, such as accents or diction, but having a firm
grasp on how each character communicates will help distinguish them from others and reveal something of their intrinsic traits. As Anne Lamott writes in her book, *Bird by Bird*, “Dialogue is the way to nail character, so you have to work on getting the voice right. You don’t want to sit there, though, trying to put the right words in their mouths” (Lamott, 67). Unfortunately, my story contains very little dialogue, and most characters wind up dead before they have the chance to say much, although the merchant does possess his own way of speaking. It is not uncommon, however, to apply unique modifications to the dialogue of a character. Allow me to borrow again from *The Name of the Wind*:

“Are ye deaf, boy?” The old man pronounced it *deef*.  
I shook my head.  
“Ye dumb then?”  
I shook my head again. “No,” It felt strange talking to someone. My voice sounded odd, rough and rusty from disuse.  
He squinted at me. “You goin’ into the city?”  
I nodded, not wanting to talk again.  
“Get in then.” He nodded toward the back of the wagon. “Sam won’t mind pulling a little whippet like yuself.” He patted the rump of his mule.

(129-130)

In this case, even though we see very little description of the man other than the fact that he is old—and in the book he is driving a cart filled with squash as well—we still have a very good sense for where he is from and what he is like through this brief exchange. This connection relies on any preexisting schema the audience might have for people who speak with such an accent, and once they make this connection they immediately recognize the old man’s country farming background. It is important to note, however, that the dialogue does not have too many altered words. In fact, in the above passage there are only three words which the man modifies: “ye,” “goin’,” and “yuself,” yet this is sufficient to effectively establish his accent. If the writer tries to modify every single word in order to reflect the character’s way of speaking, then the reader
must spend a lot of time trying to decipher the dialogue itself, and will quickly grow frustrated and lose interest with the story.

On a similar note, the character’s actual diction (word choice) and manner of communicating can also be tremendously revealing, such as a mysterious and slightly “cracked” girl named Auri in *The Name of the Wind*. While her individual words might be exactly the same as any other character’s, the way in which she speaks is very different:

“There were clouds,” she said simply as she walked around the edge of the roof toward the apple tree. “So I went looking for you on top of things. But the moon’s coming out, so I came back.”

Auri scampered down the tree, then pulled up short when she saw Mola’s cloaked form sitting on the bench.

“I brought a friend to visit, Auri,” I said in my gentlest tones. “I hope you don’t mind.”

There was a long pause. “Is he nice?”

“It’s a she. And yes, she’s nice.”

Auri relaxed a bit and came a few steps closer to me. “I brought you a feather with the spring wind in it, but since you were late . . .” she looked at me gravely, “you get a coin instead.” She held it out at arm’s length, pinched between her thumb and forefinger. “It will keep you safe at night. As much as anything can, that is.” It was shaped like an Aturan penance piece, but it gleamed silver in the moonlight. I’d never seen a coin like it.

(Rothfuss, 466)

I will say now that Auri is perfectly serious about everything she says, and is not trying to be poetic when describing, “a feather with the spring wind in it.” It is because of this strange way in which she communicates that the reader eventually understands the manner in which she is somewhat “cracked” as opposed to simply being homeless or paranoid. At the same time, even though she doesn’t intend to speak in a poetic fashion, her words demonstrate that she is possessed of a reasonable intelligence. Simply by giving this character a unique way of speaking, Rothfuss is able to create an authentic and compelling individual with a very specific personality. Once again, it is important not to take unique diction too far, but if used properly and in
moderation, as Rothfuss does here, the words alone can be enough to tell the reader everything they need to know about a given character.

The last major distinction for character is how they interact with the story. A story’s plot and the characters involved are entirely inseparable, because without one the other has no reason to exist. A plot cannot grow without a character, and a character has nowhere to go without a plot. In most cases, though: “Plot grows out of character. If you focus on who the people in your story are, if you sit and write about two people you know and are getting to know better day by day, something is bound to happen” (Lamott, 54). After the author has done all their work in creating a character and making them unique—or in some unusual cases before the author has done this—what remains to see is how this character will interact with other characters and the world. Because the character is unique, they will deal with different problems and situations in their own way, and the resulting action helps to drive the story. Of course, these small interactions are fairly limited, but the specific nature of the character shapes the overall plot as well. Aswuni, for example, looks up to Master Porthos as though he were his own father, and the rest of the Masters are basically his family—it might not come through clearly because my segment is so short, but this is part of his background. Aswuni also has a natural connection with the flow of energy in the world, so while it does require much time and patience for him to learn, he is still able to grasp magic much more quickly than others. These aspects of his character will, eventually, lead him to seek out what caused the Masters’ deaths, and his innate abilities will help him learn secrets about magic which will allow him to eventually meet the god responsible. If Aswuni did not have this specific background—if he was not so close to the masters or did not have any innate talent—then the story would not be able to exist. Patrick Rothfuss does almost
the exact same thing with his own character, although he does a much better job of drawing attention to it:

“It’s probably hard to see, being his parents and all. But your young Kvothe is rather bright.” Ben refilled his cup, and held out the jug to my father, who declined it. “As a matter of fact, ‘bright’ doesn’t begin to cover it, not by half.”

(Rothfuss, 86)

Then later:

Ben coughed and continued. “If he decides to become an arcanist, I bet he’ll have a royal appointment by the time he’s twenty-four. If he gets it into his head to be a merchant I don’t doubt he’ll own half the world by the time he dies.”

My father’s brows knitted together. Ben smiled and said, “Don’t worry about the last one. He’s too curious for a merchant.”

Ben paused as if considering his next words very carefully. “He’d be accepted into the University, you know. Not for years, of course. Seventeen is about as young as they go, but I have no doubts about . . .”

(Rothfuss, 88-89)

While we do learn much more about Kvothe through his behaviors, and he does change quite a bit as the story progresses, this description is what really cues the reader into realizing what a brilliant character the protagonist is. It also gives the audience insight into his potential, and the reader can see how this brilliance and curiosity guides him through the story and explains his inspirations and motivations for undergoing certain actions. Over time, the character does develop more and more, and these changes will also significantly impact how the protagonist moves through the story. If Kvothe was never an orphan begging on the streets of Tarbean, for instance, he would not have picked up many qualities which lead him toward taking certain actions later on in the story, such as eavesdropping in on the University admissions exam.

Ultimately, after all the description and characterization and actions take place, the character’s main purpose is to give the reader a way in which to experience the world. “If your narrator is someone whose take on things fascinates you, it isn’t really going to matter if nothing much happens for a long time” (Lamott, 49), so as long as the author successfully creates a
character who is compelling, authentic, and interesting, the reader will be engaged and motivated to witness the world through their eyes.

**PLOT**

As I’ve already begun to discuss plot somewhat, via its development through character, allow me to take a step back and review some basics of how plot functions.

Most people are familiar with the plot triangle: a scalene triangle with one side gradually sloping up to the vertex before sharply dropping back down to the base line. The base line represents the direct path the character may take from beginning to end, which is never the most interesting route and is thusly disregarded. The gradual slope represents rising action and development, the vertex is the climax, and the steep drop is the resolution. This shape is a basic representation of action in a story, but rising action is usually composed of many smaller, miniature climaxes, so having the slope so gradual and consistent doesn’t necessarily make sense. “A chart of the novel's emotional development (our feeling of suspense, fascination, or anxiety as we read) is, then, Fichte's curve” (Gardner, 188), which is the same triangle, but the side of rising action is composed of peaks and falls which eventually build to the vertex of the story. In addition, “Certain forces, within and outside the character, must press him toward a certain course of action, while other forces, both within and outside, must exert strong pressure against that course of action” (Gardner, 187), so throughout the story there are always small actions, events, or traits of the character which put them into situations (the miniature climaxes) where they must make decisions, or which test their strengths and cause them to grow. It is this combination of forces, leading to peaks in action, which build to the climax of the story over
time. This can be observed to a greater or lesser degree depending on how closely the reader examines the work, but even in my piece there are at least three or four distinct peaks in action which follow this pattern. One of which is when Aswuni discovers Master Hemburr, which is something I only included after making significant revisions—in fact, Master Hemburr did not exist in my first draft. Instead, Aswuni had returned at the temple to find it completely empty:

- Backing out of the room, I tried to think about where everyone might be. I checked the main hall next, but it was empty as well, as were the several small studies and even the grounds immediately outside the temple. Finally I decided to start knocking on doors, wondering if some bizarre coincidence had caused everybody to sleep in on the same exact day, but no matter how hard I knocked on any of the doors I received no response. I even peeked inside some of them, but I never saw anyone inside. The temple had been deserted at some point, although I couldn’t tell if it had happened sometime during the night or at some point the preceding day without my knowing. Even my own master was nowhere to be found, his room empty but all his things still in place.

The reason why I changed the circumstances in the revision, aside from a few problematic plot holes this original setup posed down the line, was that it did not give Aswuni anything concrete to be upset about. This segment, while certainly a downer, does not reveal any deep emotional struggle for the main character, and as a result the ending of the original was a simple, disinteresting farewell with the merchant:

- “If you need anything else, I’ll be in town for at least a couple more days. Don’t hesitate to stop by.” With that, he snapped the reigns and the donkey began plodding its way back down the road from the temple.

By changing the previous circumstances (which was actually a difficult issue because I had to make some adjustments to the mechanisms by which magic works in order to explain why there would be dead bodies as opposed to no bodies at all) so that Aswuni discovers Master Hemburr dead at his desk, I was able to change the outcome of the entire draft and end things on a more climactic moment:
“Dear gods,” the merchant whispered. His voice was enough to show how dumbstruck he was, trying to process the sight before him. “How did this happen?”

“I don’t know,” I choked out as my legs started to wobble beneath me, and I sank to the ground, glancing up just long enough to see the neat line of long stone cairns before me. The onslaught of tears would not be quenched this time, and my entire body convulsed as I gasped for breath between sobs and buried my face in my hands. The salt from my tears stung the sores on my palms; the sores I received when building each of those cairn in the past few days. Perhaps they burned simply from the memory, or perhaps they burned to help me forget.

I did not forget. I wept, I gasped, and I shut away the world as best I could. “I don’t know!”

(19-20)

The difference between the two endings is night and day, and the revised version raises the stakes for the character in a much more significant manner. Because of this change, Aswuni has no home with any sort of family to return to, and he is also burdened with the memory of burying the ones he loved with his own two (blistered) hands. In addition, Aswuni knows neither how nor why the masters died, and the only evidence he has to work from is Master Porthos’ strange behavior the afternoon before it happened. Another way of saying this is that the forces both within and outside of the character have been increased significantly, and they push both Aswuni and the story forward in a much more dramatic way than in the original draft.

Another thing to keep in mind is that, “Though character is the emotional core of great fiction, and though action with no meaning beyond its own brute existence can have no lasting appeal, plot is—or must sooner or later become—the focus of every good writer's plan” (Gardner, 56). This may seem like a fairly straightforward idea, since the plot is essentially the story, and the story is what the author sets out to write, but keep in mind that it is character from which the plot emerges. In other words, when the story starts out the focus is almost exclusively on the character, and the plot is left to percolate in the background until it is time for the character to engage with it. Once this happens—in the form of the “second beginning” discussed
earlier—the author must gradually shift the focus from the character over to the plot. While my piece is a little too short to highlight this transition, the gradual change can be seen in *The Name of the Wind*. Unfortunately, because the shift is so gradual, I cannot extract any particular section to use as an example of this whole process. There is a moment, however, where I believe this transition makes its final distinct shift from character to plot in the story:

“Six lashes and expulsion,” the Chancellor said heavily. *Expulsion,* I thought numbly, as if I had never heard the word before. *To expel, to cast violently away.* I could feel Ambrose’s satisfaction radiating outward. For a second I was afraid that I was going to be violently ill right there in front of everyone.

“Does any master oppose this action?” the Chancellor asked ritualistically as I looked down at my feet.

“I do,” the stirring voice could only be Elodin’s.

“All in favor of suspending expulsion?” I looked up again in time to see Elodin’s hand. Elxa Dal’s. Kilvin, Lorren, the Chancellor. All hands save Hemme’s. I almost laughed out of shock and sheer disbelief. Elodin gave me his boyish smile again.

“Expulsion repealed,” the Chancellor said firmly and I felt Ambrose’s satisfaction flicker and wane beside me. “Are there any further issues?” I caught an odd note in the Chancellor’s voice. He was expecting something.

It was Elodin who spoke. “I move that Kvothe be raised to the rank of Re’lar.”

“All in favor?” All hands save Hemme’s were raised in a single motion.

“Kvothe is raised to Re’lar with Elodin as sponsor on the fifth of Fallow. Meeting adjourned.” He pushed himself up from the table and made his way to the door.

“What?!” Ambrose yelled, looking around as if he couldn’t decide who he was asking. Finally he scampered off after Hemme, who was making a quick exit behind the Chancellor and the majority of the other masters. I noticed he wasn’t limping nearly as much as he had before the trial began.

Bewildered, I stood stupidly until Elodin came over and shook my unresponsive hand.

“Confused?” he asked. “Come walk with me. I’ll explain.”

(Rothfuss, 613-614)

While it might not be apparent out of context, this segment occurs right at the tail end of the pinnacle climax in the story: when Kvothe calls the wind—by accident—after a minor antagonist breaks his lute, and shortly thereafter is expelled from the university. Calling the wind is the last major change which occurs within the character in the story, but even this is driven more by the
circumstances of the moment than any action on his own part. This particular moment is also when Elodin—Master Namer at the University—agrees to help teach Kvothe naming (to an extent). While Kvothe’s actions throughout the story have brought him to this point, the emphasis does shift somewhat from what Kvothe is doing to what is happening to him. As a result, a lot of questions and loose ends for plot events finally come together, which gives the reader an immense sense of satisfaction.

There are also some aspects of plot, though, which can be seen on a much smaller scale and serve a much more specific purpose, and in some cases happen unintentionally. More specifically, there are times while writing when I might have a specific idea for how I want a scene to turn out, yet somehow, by the time I finish, the action the events I intended to include have changed due to the nature of the characters. This is one reason why Anne Lamott suggests the writer does not plan every event ahead of time.

On the other hand, in lieu of a plot you may find that you have a sort of temporary destination, perhaps a scene that you envision as the climax. So you write toward this scene, but when you get there, or close, you see that because of all you’ve learned about your characters along the way, it no longer works. The scene may have triggered the confidence that got you to work on your piece, but now it doesn’t ring true and so it does not make the final cut.

(Lamott, 85-86)

This is another example of why plot must grow out of character, rather than forcing a character to fit the plot, because the author often discovers that the characters would actually resolve the situation in a different way than they initially planned. In my own writing this happened several times—where the nature of a character forced me to change the outcome of a scene—and the first time I encountered this situation it came as a shock. When I originally wrote the scene in which Master Porthos and Aswuni run across the “deer”, my initial intention was for Aswuni to peek around his master and see that the creature was not actually a deer, but rather a mysterious,
unidentifiable animal which happened to have antlers like a deer. When I actually arrived at this point in my writing, though, I found that Master Porthos was so protective of Aswuni that he never let him get even then slightest glimpse of what was on the path:

His white cloak fluttered a little as he reached back and grabbed my arm with his hand, although he did it without turning. He remained facing forward, and I could tell by the pressure he exerted on my arm that something in front of us had concerned him.

I went to step to the side, trying to see what had my master so concerned, but the moment I moved I felt his grip tighten and hold me fast. Whatever it was in front of him, he clearly did not want me to see it, and because of my trust in him I remained still, biting back my curiosity.

When I considered this section for revision, I decided that Aswuni must see something, and I compromised by coming up with the current form:

I tried to peer around his side, hoping to see whatever stopped my master in his tracks, but the moment I shifted I felt his grip tighten and hold me fast. I managed to catch a short glimpse of what seemed to be the points on a set of antlers, but beyond that I could see nothing beyond my master’s white robe. Perhaps he was concerned I would spook the deer, but I had trouble finding a reason why he would be so concerned about such a thing. Either way, my master was determined to keep me from poking my head out, so there was no sense trying to put up a fight.

Despite my efforts, the characters I created were unique enough that they could not be finagled into a plot event which was not natural to their behavior. In all honesty, this is actually a very good thing for two reasons. The first is because it means that the characters are authentic enough that they have an understandable set of values or beliefs which cause them to behave in whatever manner is most natural to them. The second is that it prevented me from forcing the characters into actions which oppose those very same values and beliefs, because doing so would ultimately undermine their authenticity, thus causing them to lose their believability to the reader—and, as already discussed, having a believable and authentic character is the single most important feature to a successful story.
One other element of plot, which might not receive much consideration, is what it actually includes. This may seem like a silly point to make, since a story is a story and the author’s job is to tell the reader everything which happens in said story, but it is actually important to bear in mind that this is precisely what the author is doing: telling the story and nothing else. There may be events which could happen over the course of the story, but if they have no bearing on the characters or plot, then they are not included in the writing itself. As John Gardner writes, “If the plot is to be elegant, not sloppy and inefficient, then for the ensuing action the reader must know the full set of causes and (essentially) nothing else; that is, no important information in the exposition should be irrelevant to the action that ensues” (Gardner, 186). Another way of thinking about this is to consider how often you read about a character going to the bathroom. It almost never happens, but it is not because figures in stories have no need to poop. It is because some events and details, such as going to the bathroom, having a casual conversation on the street, or what the character ate for breakfast in the morning, generally have little or nothing to contribute to the overall story. As such, these events are not included to prevent the reader from becoming distracted or losing interest. This is also one of the most significant parts of revision, because often times I might write certain details or entire sections which ultimately contribute nothing to the characters or plot and must be culled for the final draft. For example, in my original draft I included a segment where Aswuni woke up the next morning—the day after Master Porthos told him to run away in the woods—to the empty temple and wandered around, realizing (somewhat) for the second time that nobody is there aside from himself. In the final draft, however, the action jumps directly from the night Aswuni discovers Master Hemburr dead at his desk to a whole three days in the future. While there are likely some points along the way which might have revealed something of Aswuni’s character, there are not enough significant
forces pushing or pulling the character during this time to make it worth including. As such, I trimmed out the entire section, and even though the final draft bears no trace of this change, it significantly improved the overall quality of the story which I produced.

There are many other elements of plot which I have not discussed, such as planting plot seeds which grow into significant events, or trying to create an outline ahead of time, but these factors either make no appearance in the piece I have produced, or have not currently impacted my design of the story. I will say that I have considered the entire plotline to a certain extent (if the story were to be finished), but I also recognize that the entire story could change direction in the process of writing—similar to how Master Porthos prevents Aswuni from seeing the “deer” as discussed earlier—so trying to explain the rest of the action here would likely be a waste of time and space.

**STRUCTURE**

Even if the author does come up with a terrific story—they’ve created the right world, described their characters and environment, and have interesting developments and plot events—there’s still a chance the whole thing might fall flat and die. The reader might still lose interest or otherwise be disengaged from the story, and this all comes down to the nitty gritty technical aspects of writing which can make or break any book. This is where the concept of the, “uninterrupted fictional dream,” comes into play, as it is the most important idea to keep in mind when trying to engage the reader. As John Gardner explains it:

We may observe, first, that if the effect of the dream is to be powerful, the dream must probably be vivid and continuous—vivid because if we are not quite clear about what it is that we're dreaming, who and where the characters are, what it is that they're doing or trying to do and why, our emotions and judgments must be
confused, dissipated, or blocked; and continuous because a repeatedly interrupted flow of action must necessarily have less force than an action directly carried through from its beginning to its conclusion.

(Gardner, 31)

This is why the author must pay so much attention to how they actually go about writing their story. They must consider content, style, feeling, and everything else that comes from putting words on a page, but for the most part all of this comes down to structure; how the author chooses to use the mechanics of writing to communicate their story.

Structure, as it applies to different writers, can often be thought of as style itself, since all good authors are familiar with the basic grammar and mechanics of language. The only variation, then, comes from how the choose to apply these language rules in order to achieve their purpose. As a general example (and which you might have already noticed), the style employed by Patrick Rothfuss and myself are tremendously different. I tend to use long and elaborate sentences with lots of description, while Rothfuss is somewhat briefer but includes significantly more action and dialogue (and in my opinion, his style is much more effective at maintaining the “uninterrupted fictional dream”). This said, both Patrick Rothfuss and myself are effective at communicating certain ideas and feelings through our writing due to how we handle structure. For instance, Rothfuss writes, in part of The Name of the Wind:

I felt weightless, like I was floating.

Then I struck the ground. Not gently, like a feather settling down. Hard. Like a brick hitting a cobblestone street. I landed on my back with my left arm beneath me. My vision went dark as the back of my head struck the ground and all the air was driven from my body.

I didn’t lose consciousness. I just lay there, breathless and unable to move. I remember thinking, quite earnestly, that I was dead. That I was blind.

Eventually my sight returned, leaving me blinking against the sudden brightness of the blue sky. Pain tore through my shoulder and I tasted blood. I couldn’t breathe. I tried to roll off my arm, but my body wouldn’t listen to me. I had broken my neck . . . my back . . .

After a long, terrifying moment, I managed to gasp a shallow breath, then another. I gave a sigh of relief and realized that I had at least one broken rib in
addition to everything else, but I moved my fingers slightly, then my toes. They worked. I hadn’t broken my spine.

As I lay there, counting my blessings and broken ribs, Elodin stepped into my field of vision.

He looked down at me. “Congratulations,” he said. “That was the stupidest thing I’ve ever seen.” His expression was a mix of awe and disbelief. “Ever.”

(Rothfuss, 314-315)

When I first began my analysis of this book, the sentence and paragraph length was one of the first things I noticed. While Rothfuss does do an excellent job relaying detail to the audience, the reader also gets a feeling for Kvothe’s disorientation, and something of his concern as well. This is largely because of how Rothfuss chose to structure his sentences and paragraphs in this moment. Rothfuss is very conscious of the pace he and flow he sets in his writing, or as John Gardner puts it, “By keeping out a careful ear for rhythm, the writer can control the emotion of his sentences with considerable subtlety” (Gardner, 152). Most of the sentences are not compound, and the paragraphs themselves are very short as well. This is the result of Rothfuss jumping between thoughts and ideas within the narrator, and the fast-paced jumble creates the same feeling of disorientation in the reader’s head that is supposedly in Kvothe’s as well. This is essentially the same concept I discussed earlier, when I referred to setting and the feeling of tranquility which begins my story, but with more attention to the actual mechanisms by which the scene is described as opposed to the content itself. For example, here is my opening paragraph once again:

The sky was nothing other than a rich blue expanse, stretching endlessly in every direction until the pale light of the horizon dulled its color as it sank beneath the treetops. The divine light of the sun forced all watchful eyes to avert their gaze or seek to hide their faces in shade. Just looking up to the heavens was enough to impress the stillness of the world into the heart of every creature that poked its head out from under the leaves sprouting from reborn trees or rocks which scattered the soft earth beneath their canopy. The air was so still that the slightest whisper of a passing angel would sing out across the roots and grass to every ear that stopped but a moment to listen. Not a single leaf flickered on the nearby oaks, and not a sound could be heard aside from occasional bird calls and
squirrels chewing their way through nuts finally thawed after months buried beneath the ground.

(1)

In almost the opposite manner as Rothfuss, I create the gentle calm feeling within the reader because I chose to use long and flowing sentences, rather than short and jumpy ones. The effect is very similar to what I discussed before in relation to pace as well, and the end result is exactly the same. By structuring my sentences in a long and flowing manner, I am able to control how exactly the reader moves through the text, and in doing so I influence the state of the reader’s mind as they work through the story. The reason why this is so closely connected to what I discussed earlier is because the roots of many aspects of writing come from the structure itself. By altering the sentence form and constructions, thereby changing the mechanisms through which the story is communicated, the author can control their reader in many different ways.

While the author does establish certain mindsets within the reader for each scene, there are also times when the author wants to make a shift in these mindsets as well. Sometimes I might need the reader to feel emotionally vulnerable for a portion of the scene, but a little while later I need the audience to possess curiosity or some other feeling. This is where the use of white space can be effectively employed, and not just as a way to represent a change in time or place. For example, in my own piece I jump from the scene where Aswuni is reading his book to when he is walking down the road:

I clapped the book shut and jumped to my feet, walking briskly to see what it was I heard. I felt a hopeful surge in my chest that somehow I would see the masters, that everything had been one cruel nightmare from which I had just awoken, but at the same time I fought to suppress the feeling, knowing that the pain from losing that hope might hurt just as much as the night I returned to the temple. Even so, I could not help but notice the butterflies flocking in my stomach, and I knew there was little I could do to keep from getting ahead of myself.

* * *

* * *
I kept walking down the road, and it was not long at all before I saw the source of the noise. A cart, pulled by a single donkey, was rolling its way toward the temple, packed with sacks and crates behind a man in a plain brown shirt which sported at least one or two rips and patches. Squinting my eyes I could make out long black hair and a short beard, and in that moment I could feel the butterflies drop to the pit of my stomach, almost bringing me down to my knees. (17)

Even though almost no location or time has passed, the reader feels a significant shift in both pace and feeling from one side of the white space to the other. Most of this is due to the interruption of action and flow, but that is also part of the purpose. Whenever I choose to end one segment and begin another, it not only signals the reader that the action has finished, but that they should reset their brain and prepare for something new. In some senses, white space almost acts as a power button where the reader is switched off and back on again, and when they come back to the story their mind is a blank slate and can be manipulated into an entirely new mindset by the writer. The passage above shows Aswuni in a state of hopefulness, but immediately after the white space everything he has calmed down and is objectively viewing the source of the noise. Without the white space, the reader would still apply the same feeling of hopefulness onto Aswuni when he meets the merchant as he had when he first heard the noise. (Try covering the white space up with a finger and reading the section again.) By adding the break, however, I have signaled to the reader that there is a distinct shift, and they should pay close attention to the first few lines immediately after the jump. This allows them to adopt the more objective state of mind, and thus their interpretation of the scene through Aswuni’s eyes changes as well. Even Patrick Rothfuss uses the same principle in his book, and with much greater frequency than I do.

I forced my best smile onto my face and reached to take his hand. I was my father’s son and a trouper. I would take my refusal with the high dignity of the Edema Ruh. The earth would crack and swallow this glittering, self-important place before I would show a trace of despair.
And somewhere in the watching audience was Ambrose. The earth would have to swallow the Eolian, Imre, and the whole Centhe Sea before I gave him a grain of satisfaction over this.

So I smiled brightly and took Stanchion’s hand in my own. As I shook it, something hard pressed into my palm. Looking down I saw a glimmer of silver. My talent pipes.

My expression must have been a delight to watch. I looked back up at Stanchion. His eyes danced and he winked at me.

I turned and held my pipes aloft for everyone to see. The Eolian roared again. This time it roared a welcome.

“You’ll have to promise me,” a red-eyed Simmon said seriously, “That you will never play that song again without warning me first. Ever.”

“Was it that bad?” I smiled giddily at him.

“No!” Simmon almost cried out. “It’s . . . I’ve never—” He struggled, wordless for a moment, then bowed his head and began to cry hopelessly into his hands.

(Rothfuss, 372-373)

The top part of this scene is the tail end of an extremely tense moment where Kvothe performed on his lute in an attempt to earn his “talent pipes,” which are only presented to the best musicians in the region, but during his performance one of his lute string broke. As such, the reader feels overwhelmingly apprehensive up to the white space, but immediately afterwards they can emotionally reset. This allows the audience to start over and approach the rest of the chapter with an upbeat happiness, free of the tension and stress they felt just moments before.

Another way the author can influence the reader’s interpretation of the story is through the character’s point of view. While the perspective itself does impact the way in which the audience interacts with the story, point of view actually puts the author in a specific position through which they can manipulate the story’s structure differently. For instance, most of *The Name of the Wind* is told through the first person perspective, and through all the examples I have presented it is clear that the reader is experiencing the story though Kvothe’s eyes. Parts of the story, however (the Interludes), are written in third person, and are not even from Kvothe’s
viewpoint. What this allows Rothfuss to do is actually make the reader feel more distant from the story, so they are in the position of an observer rather than an important character:

He swept the floor methodically, catching all the corners. He washed the tables and the bar, moving with a patient efficiency. At the end of an hour’s work, the water in his bucket was still clean enough for a lady to wash her hands in. Finally, he pulled a stool behind the bar and began to polish the vast array of bottles nestled between the two huge barrels. He wasn’t nearly as crisp and efficient about this chore as he had been with the others, and it soon became obvious the polishing was only an excuse to touch and hold. He even hummed a little, although he did not realize it, and would have stopped himself if he had known.

As he turned the bottles in his long, graceful hands the familiar motion eased a few tired lines from his face, making him seem younger, certainly not yet thirty. Not even near thirty. Young for an innkeeper. Young for a man with so many tired lines remaining on his face.

(Rothfuss, 10-11)

This added distance creates distinct sense of mystery in the scene, because the audience is trying to understand Kvothe’s actions but does not have any insight into his actual thoughts. All the reader knows is what Kvothe appears to be doing, and because of this they crave to know more about the man behind the bar. This curiosity, more than anything else, pulls the reader into the book and carries them all the way until Kvothe begins to tell his story in earnest, and by that time they are so fascinated that they will sit through hundreds of pages to learn the slightest things about the man described in the very beginning. My own piece, of course, is written in first person, so the reader never experiences this sense of mystery about Aswuni. Instead they experience the environment exactly as he does, and this is actually essential because of the world I created. Imagine my opening scene where Aswuni’s consciousness drifts into the earth around him. What would that be like if I did not allow the reader to view the world from Aswuni’s perspective? He would simply appear as a boy sitting in a clearing and nothing else. In my case, use of the first person does not only allow the reader to connect more closely with the main
character, but it allows them to experience the otherwise impossible methods which constitute magic in the fantasy universe as well.

The last element of structure I will discuss is also one of the most unique, and combines the author’s use of mechanics, the overall quality of the writing, and even the reader’s imagination in order to effectively progress the story. As I said earlier, one struggle I have is my desire to describe every minute detail of the world, even though much of it does not add anything to the story. Doing so only serves to distract or disengage the reader, and so it’s better to leave those details out. But if I do not provide a crystal clear image of the world or the actions undertaken by the characters, then how do I create the vivid dream which is so important to harnessing the reader’s attention? The short answer is that I do not always have to. As I have already discussed, it is very important for the author not to include any excess information, yet sometimes certain images can be created within the reader’s mind without explaining them outright. A good example in The Name of the Wind is when Kvothe is at the university and gives a demonstration to a class, after which he wants them to applaud. Rather than toil through the specifics for how Kvothe might cue the audience into clapping, Rothfuss simply writes:

At this point I used one of the tricks of the stage. There is a certain inflection of voice and body language that signals a crowd to applaud. I cannot explain how exactly it is done, but it had its intended effect. I nodded my head to them and turned to face Hemme amidst applause which, though far from deafening, was probably more than any he had ever received.

(Rothfuss, 260)

The reader is able to accept this explanation at face value, but they also conjure a mental image of young Kvothe in front of a class doing something before everyone in the room begins their applause. Even if the reader does not come up with a single specific idea for how Kvothe is doing this, Rothfuss is able to communicate a complicated vocal tone and physical gesture without interrupting the flow he has established in his writing. The reader’s imagination is more
than sufficient to fill in any gaps which might appear in the author’s work, and so the clever writer is able to get by using as few concrete details as possible since the reader can make up for anything left out. While I may not have the same mastery over the audience as Rothfuss has, there are times in my piece where the reader’s imagination (probably) comes into play in order to fill in any details I left out. One of which is immediately after Aswuni checks the temple for Master Porthos and decides to head to Master Hemburr’s room instead:

I shook the thought out of my head and left the hall, walking briskly to the Master Hemburr’s room. His window was still lit with the tiny flicker of a candle when I passed by outside, so if anyone knew whether or not Master Porthos was back in the temple or not it would be him.

There was still a gentle glow beneath Master Hemburr’s door, although it was so faint that I almost walked right past it. I gave a few light knocks this time, harder than I had on Master Porthos’ door, and when no response came I knocked a little harder still, careful not to be too loud and wake the other masters in adjacent rooms. Once again there was no response, and once again I was forced to open the door and peek inside.

While every reader might have a somewhat different mental image, each one will have a distinct idea for what it’s like for Aswuni walking down the hall, how he notices the light beneath Master Hemburr’s door, and even an idea of what the door itself looks like, despite the fact I provided absolutely no description of it. In truth, there is no need for me to describe these things precisely because the reader has made decisions about all of them without my even prompting. While I could spare a line or two discussing the stony walls, a chair positioned part way down the hallway, or even the door itself, doing so would only delay or distract from the action at hand and ultimately does not contribute any important information. If I were trying to build suspense at this point, then it might be a good thing, but since the action of getting to Master Hemburr’s room is more important than the details along the way, I can safely allow the reader to assume any missing imagery and avoid distraction from the important events at hand.
Just like every other element to writing a story, there are countless other technicalities I could discuss as they relate to writing, but for the purposes of my project these are the ones which have proven to be the most significant and useful in its creation. Regardless of what techniques or style choices an author decides to make, they must always keep in mind that, “…nothing in what I'm saying is more fundamental than the concept of the uninterrupted fictional dream” (Gardner, 115). No matter what the story is about or how it turns out, as long as the reader is fully engaged and does not lose interest in the events taking place then the piece may be considered, at least in some regards, a success.

**FINAL THOUGHTS**

Something to bear in mind throughout this entire process is that every single aspect of writing—the setting, character, plot, and structure—are all dependent on each other in order to exist. While often times it is easy to distinguish bits and pieces which are unique to character, plot, etc., there are many other cases where these aspects are interchangeable between subjects. As such, there are certainly moments where I seem to repeat myself. These moments are actually some of the most interesting parts to consider, because they demonstrate the intimacy that every tiny fragment of a story has with every other fragment.

I have also learned throughout this process what it means to alter one or two of those fragments, and I have witnessed an entire story crumble into dust because of a few simple terms or ideas. But more than that, I have seen how these tiny pieces can come together to form something which is truly awesome.
Perhaps the most important lesson, though, is that writing is not always a simple and straightforward task. In fact, writing is almost never a simple and straightforward task, and despite all the time and effort I spent on my own story, if I were to run through another draft I would most certainly make numerous changes in every aspect I have discussed so far. Even reflecting on my work as I have done this piece has caused me to reconsider almost every part of my writing—so much so that any future drafts will likely change the style and content to such an extent that it will bear almost no relation to the original version, save for the overarching storyline.

Despite this, no matter how much time I spend writing, rewriting, revising, editing, and doctoring my work in every fashion known to man (if I could give me story open heart surgery I certainly would), there will always be some part that could be changed to improve the story as a whole, whether it is just a word, a scene, or the entire projection of the plot. The key is to always take the time, go back, and reconsider, and if all else fails, “You simply keep putting down one damn word after the other, as you hear them, as they come to you” (Lamott, 236). Eventually, after days and weeks and months and years of finagling just the right amount of character, plot, setting, structure, and whatever else I can jam onto the page, I might finally arrive at something I consider to be finished.

Maybe.
Works Cited

