Ardath Rekha's Fan Fiction

eBook Editions

Articles:

Short Pieces About Writing and Fandom

By Ardath Rekha

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Synopsis: A collection of articles and blog posts about writing and fan fiction issues, written during the "AoVD Era."

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Note: This article was originally written in late summer 2001, when the Art of Vin Diesel message board was still brand new and many new writers were asking for help with self-editing. The instructions given here were designed for new fanfiction writers with little or no proofreading experience, but who were worried about being derided by more experienced writers on the site. Over the years, as the article was picked up for use on other sites, additional fandoms were added to make the references a little more universal.

Check Your Story!

We've all been there. It's one in the morning and you've just watched *Pitch Black* for the twenty-seventh time, and your mind is buzzing. A "what-if" scenario with Riddick and Jack has popped into your head. Or maybe you just finished watching the season finale of *Angel* for the tenth time and you have this powerful idea for a story in which Illyria and Spike embark on even more outrageous adventures. You grab some paper and begin to scribble frantically, or boot up your computer and begin typing like a maniac. Hours later, the idea setting your brain on fire has been transferred to paper or disk, and you sit back feeling a sense of inordinate satisfaction. You're *done*. Now it's time to post it to your friends on the Internet!

Just a minute, though, because you're nowhere *near* done.

A great deal of Internet fanfiction, for whatever reason, gets posted just like that. Right after the initial creative frenzy is over, the writer puts it up on their favorite boards, without a single editing pass or even checking their spelling. Most of this fiction is difficult – if not impossible – for others to read. This defeats your purpose – you want to share your work with others, right? So, before you put it online, here are a few things you should do first:

1. Check your spelling!

This is one of the most common omissions of new writers, despite the fact that it's one of the easiest mistakes to correct. If you're using a word-processing program, chances are it has a spell-checker built into it. Find it and use it. But *don't* rely exclusively on it. It won't tell you when you typed "too" but meant "to." If you're using technical language, it may not have a particular word in its internal dictionary. If you're serious about writing, it's time to get yourself a good dictionary anyway. Print out a copy of the story and go through it. Try reading it backwards – that will help you concentrate on the spelling of the words, and help prevent you from unconsciously interpreting an incorrect word as the correct one. If you're not sure whether the word you're using is the one you mean – or even one that really exists – *look it up*.

2. Check your grammar!

>Once again, your word processing program should have grammar tools that you can use. However, once again, do not rely exclusively on the program. Use it, but think about what it's suggesting. Microsoft Word comes up with some pretty bizarre suggestions from time to time, so don't just hit OK to everything or you'll give yourself a huge headache. There are several useful grammar reference books out there for writers. All writers should own a dictionary, a thesaurus, and one or both of these:

The Annotated Elements of Style by William Strunk, Jr.

This book is small and concise, and can almost be considered the Writer's Bible. After the dictionary and thesaurus, this should be at the top of your to-buy list. And, given its size, it'll be the cheapest of the books you buy, too.

Essentials of English by Vincent F. Hopper, et al

This is another excellent reference book for grammar rules. Like *Elements,* it features many examples of grammatical errors and the ways to correct them.

Spelling and grammar errors happen to everyone. All writers misspell words. All writers make typos. There's no shame in it, as long as you're willing to take the time and make the effort to correct your mistakes. When you read a story with no spelling mistakes or grammatical errors, don't think "oh, that's way beyond me." What you're seeing there is the result of the writer's *hard work,* and that's well within your reach.

3. Check your Tense!

A lot of new writers have trouble with tense. One sentence will be in present tense ("Riddick grabs his shiv and lunges forward.") and the next will be in past tense. ("Jack flinched back as one of the creatures flew by.") Sometimes, a single sentence will move from one tense to another ("Riddick laughed as Jack wipes the mud off of her face.") This is a fairly common mistake, so don't be ashamed if you catch yourself making it, but it's one that you need to correct. You need to choose your tense, past or present, and *stay in it*. There are a lot of other rules that govern the use of tense, but we're not going to get into them now. The books listed above will help you deal with tense issues in greater detail – use them.

4. Check your Point of View!

Do you switch perspectives with no warning? Do you go from First Person ("I") to Third Person ("he" or "she") and back again? This is another common mistake.

If you're writing in First Person, you need to *stay in it*. Your narrative perspective needs to remain with the **one** character you have chosen. You see only what he or she sees; you know only what he or she knows. The only information you or your readers can have about the thoughts, emotions or motivations of other characters is what can be interpreted from their expressions and actions. And remember, the character whose perspective you're writing from *isn't always going to interpret those expressions and actions correctly.*

Second Person is, as a rule, something to avoid altogether in fiction. You'll notice that it's being used in this paragraph – *you* are the subject, and the article is written about what *you* are doing and seeing. However, aside from the "Choose-Your-Own-Adventure" books you may have read as a child, or Fantasma's "Five-Minute Fantasies," it usually doesn't work in fiction. Avoid it for now.

Writing in Third Person allows an author to be a little more flexible. Some transition between different characters' POVs is acceptable, but you're still playing with fire. Any time your POV switches without warning, it will jar your reader out of the narrative. Stay with a single character throughout your chapter. If you switch POVs, do so at a chapter, scene or section break. A very few experienced authors can successfully switch between POVs in a single scene – during, for example, heated dialogue – but this takes practice and extreme care. Many professional writers who do it are *not* successful, and it weakens their stories. I'm sorry to say that the novelization of *Pitch Black* itself is a prime example of this: some of the point-of-view transitions were difficult for readers to follow. When your readers have to stop and think about what they're reading, they step outside of the story, and that's the point when you as a writer can lose them. The best rule for now is to pick a character and stay with him or her for the duration.

5. Check your dialogue!

Do your conversations run together? An important rule of thumb is this: any time a new person speaks, a new paragraph starts. If you have more than one person speaking in a single paragraph, you're just going to confuse your readers.

Remember to indicate who's speaking. If you have just two speakers, you don't have to tag *every* paragraph with their names, but do it often enough to make sure that the readers – and you – are keeping track of who is saying what.

Do your characters talk like real people? This is another place where a lot of new writers can get in trouble. Listen to the words and cadence of your character, if it's a canon character from a movie. Riddick, for instance, has several "urban" linguistic patterns. I've read many fics that had him using a much more formal, "proper" speaking style, and it always jarred me out of the narrative. The more your character's speech patterns resemble the original portrayal, the easier it will be for people to believe in the character in your story. Also, finding the characters' natural voices will often help you understand them well enough to portray them convincingly in your narrative.

6. Check it again!

Set your story aside for a day or so and come back to it with a fresh eye. Sometimes grammar errors and spelling mistakes you didn't notice before will become glaring when you reread your tale. Look for things you didn't notice before – overuse of a word, for instance (when I edited a recent chapter of my fic, I found myself gasping "good grief, I used the word 'suddenly' more than a dozen times!"). If it's part of a multi-part work, go back over your previous chapters and make sure what you've written in your latest chapter doesn't

contradict anything you wrote before. Make sure you're not reusing a phrase or concept that you're particularly fond of – many writers have done that by accident. One published author inadvertently reused about six or seven pages of storyline in a sequel to the book those pages first appeared in! That can be a very large embarrassment.

7. Read your story aloud!

A lot of times, just hearing the words spoken will show you where your flaws are. You can hear the hitches in your dialogue, and can feel it when a sentence is too long-winded.

8. Check the board requirements and follow them!

The board you're posting to may have rules about ratings and content. Some boards (The UVDFC, for example) have separate forums for general fiction and sexually explicit material. Make sure you're posting in the right place.

Make sure you're not breaking any of the content guidelines (on the Rhiana Griffith Fan Club site, for example, fiction featuring Rhiana Griffith as herself is strictly forbidden). If you've never posted to a particular board before, do yourself a favor and read some of the posts already there, especially ones by veteran board regulars. That will give you a feeling for the kind of fiction they like. If your story's too different, you might want to wait on posting it until they've become acquainted with you through other pieces that are more to their tastes. They'll be more receptive to something different at that point.

Check the ratings structure, figure out what rating is most appropriate for your work (if you're not sure, err on the side of caution and use the harder rating) and post the rating in your title. Post it again at the beginning of your piece, along with an explanation of what sort of content qualifies it for that rating (examples: R for violence and language, or NC-17 for extremely explicit sex) so that readers can avoid content they'd prefer not to be exposed to.

9. Be ready for an honest reaction.

Most of the boards out there tend to be noncommittal in their responses. You may hear a lot of "I like it, write more" with no specifics about what a reader likes or dislikes. You may hear nothing at all at first. Or you may get honest responses along the lines of "I really don't like what you had Riddick doing in chapter 2" or "I don't think Dom would say that." Be prepared to take it on the chin, and give serious consideration to what people tell you. You can't grow as a writer if nobody tells you where your weaknesses are.

If you don't hear anything at first, don't assume that means no-one's reading or that everybody hates it. I would guess that as many as 90% of the Internet readers never say a word about what they're reading to any of the authors. If you continue your story, and work hard at it, you will begin to get a response. Hard work shows, and the knowledge that you've been working hard to entertain your readers will make them more responsive, and more willing to give you genuine feedback on your work.

If you're not getting enough critiquing and want some serious help, try looking for a beta reader. This is someone who can approach your story with a fresh and critical editing eye and help you improve it. Go here to learn more about what a beta reader is, what one does, and how you can find one.

But once again, don't just throw your first draft out onto the net and expect the praise to roll in. Check your story, and your readers will thank you.

*(And a big Thank You to **my** beta reader, Tkilmer, for her support and advice.)*

August 7, 2001

Note: This was originally written sometime in early-mid 2002, and then was lost during AoVD's very first site outage, when we lost a few months of posts to the vagaries of our former webhosting service. I dusted it off and reposted it in October 2003, and it vanished into the depths of the board where it has lain dormant since. But if you've ever wondered why cinephiles tend to insist on subtitles rather than dubs, most of the time, this might help explain.

The Dubious Pleasures of Dubbing

For those of you who are, as I am, completely obsessive about *Pitch Black,* there are two versions of the DVD available in America. One, the most commonly-available, is the unrated Director's cut, featuring approximately three or four minutes of additional footage. Although the footage is entirely comprised of additional character-driven dialogue, since the MPAA never saw it when they gave the movie its rating, it has to be listed as "unrated." And because Wal-Mart is pathological about such things, they won't carry it. For them, and other stores like them, an R-rated theatrical release version is available.

I own both. I *told* you, I'm obsessed.

Now, I recently discovered that there's a nice little "bonus" on the R-rated version that doesn't exist on the unrated version: a French audio track. I was excited. I popped that sucker back into the DVD player and keyed it up.

It was awful. Folks, I feel terrible for anyone who watched *Pitch Black* for the first time listening to this dub… it's amazing exactly how much a bad dub can kill the mood and passion of a movie.

Let me explain. And yes, I'm going to do so at length.

Acting is not just a matter of stepping in front of the camera and looking good. Both sight and sound are joined in the creation of a gifted performance. If you take one away, the other suffers. Sound — and voice — are crucial. Tone, intonation, or a hidden hint of irony may shape or *reshape* an entire scene and change the whole meaning of what's occurring.

This is never more apparent than when the original actors' voices are stripped away and new ones are substituted in.

Now *some* dubbing jobs are masterful works, employing deeply talented actors and actresses who have listened to and understand the lines they're replacing and can match their spirit. But I have *got* to ask… *who* cast the collection of actors and actresses who dubbed this version of *Pitch Black?* Was anyone directing them? Was *anyone* involved in the process actually *taking a moment to care about what they were doing?*

First — let's talk about miscasting. The most egregious examples of this are in the voices for Riddick, Shazza and Jack.

Riddick's voice isn't deep enough. Worse yet, the growl is gone. The hints of an urban upbringing are gone as well. We're left with a voice and delivery that evokes the image of an oily, mustache-twirling villain from a bad '40s Film Noir. The grace, the charisma, the sly intelligence and the raw sexual magnetism of Richard B. Riddick are severely subdued, because the new voice doesn't merely fail to convey those attributes — it contradicts them.

Shazza's voice, conversely, is far *too* deep. As done by Claudia Black, Shazza had an extraordinary voice, ranging from a soft, deep purr to a somewhat hoarse baby coo. It was the voice of a sharply intelligent, capable woman with nothing to prove, simultaneously powerful and feminine. The actress dubbing her, however, seems to be under the mistaken impression that a strong woman has to be hopelessly butch. She pushes her voice to the deepest part of its range, practically croaking out some of her lines, seemingly determined to come across as more masculine than the men around her. The result is that Shazza is vocally reduced to a caricature… and her early death becomes a *foregone conclusion* rather than being a *surprise twist*.

Jack's voice is probably the worst miscasting of all. As Void commented to me while we watched it: "Well, *she* sounds about twenty-nine years old." The voice is unmistakably the voice of a woman in her late twenties, not that of a thirteen-year-old child of ambiguous gender. Where Rhiana Griffith used the deepest part of her range while masquerading as a boy, and then switched to softer, higher tones after Jack was "outed," her dub makes no attempt at all to vary her delivery. The voice is far too feminine, and far too mature, for the character.

Although I do take issue with some of the other actors' and actresses' deliveries, I don't necessarily take issue with their casting… but these three voice-overs in particular are examples of lousy, disinterested casting

at its worst.

Delivery is definitely the next issue, and the worst offender in *this* department is the actress "playing" Carolyn Fry. Her *voice* is fine, but her interpretation of the character is *way* off.

Fry, you will recall, is a subtle, multilayered character. Reeling from the devastating loss of friends and ship, grief- and guilt-stricken over the consequences (both real and imagined) of her momentary panic, Fry is forced to take on a role she neither wants nor feels qualified for, that of Captain. Her determination to do that job well, to acquit herself for her past failings, drives her. Her growing awareness that Johns — ostensibly her logical ally — is too unstable to be trusted, shapes her choices. And her genuine love for the passengers that she almost sacrificed, but has now come to know, is what spurs her to right the wrong she almost did them, at the cost of her own life. It's a spectacular arc for *any* character, and Radha Mitchell did it amazing justice, giving Fry a quiet, melancholy strength.

The dubbed Fry, unfortunately, is a whiny ninny! She has no connection to her crewmates — as Owens is dying and she calls for her passengers to bring him some anesthesia, she delivers the line with all the passion of someone announcing "there's a turkey leg in the fridge if you're hungry."

Her whoop of victory, upon discovering the skiff, is an appalling squeal now, making her sound (in Void's words) "like she just stepped on a shell at the beach." And when the creatures almost pull her back into the cave, things descend to a new nadir. This Fry screams and screams the whole time, sounding like a little girl who just had a spider dropped down her shirt. Listening to this Fry whine her way through the movie, one has to wonder why any of the others paid attention to her at all, much less followed her orders. And by the time she's pulled out of Riddick's grasp and into the darkness, the shock of the moment is no longer "oh my god, she's not going to make it" but "how the hell did she manage to survive *this* long?"

Pitch Black was an amazing movie that took the more clichéd elements of science fiction and turned them on their side. Between the writing, directing, acting, and stunning visuals, new life was breathed into an old concept. So it's amazing to discover just how much of that life a bad dubbing job can kill. No wonder it did no better overseas — without the depth given to it by the original performers' vocal deliveries, *Pitch Black* gets knocked back into the realm of "just another sci fi movie." Fry's moral struggles and Riddick's enigmatic charisma are lost, making it much harder for a viewer to connect with their dilemmas and root for them.

Void's analysis is that the voices sounded French-Canadian, so it's possible that another, better French dub has been released in Europe. But it's a damn shame… *Pitch Black* is a remarkable movie and deserved better handling than it got.

Plus, given the effect Vin's voice *alone* is known to have on women (and yes, I speak from personal experience here!) it seems like a genuine ***crime*** that viewers in foreign countries had to listen to some lesser voice in its place.

Okay, my rant is done. ;)

Thoughts on Good Ol' Mary Sue

I was cleaning through some files when I found this rumination I started a while back. It's not half-bad…

The question of Mary Sue is always an interesting one. What defines Mary Sue is subjective and somewhat arbitrary in the minds of the readers, but here's the clincher:

When we read fiction, generally what pulls us into a story is our ability to identify with the protagonist. We look at her (or him) and see some aspect(s) of ourselves. We understand to some degree, at least, how they are approaching a situation, why they think what they think, why they do what they do.

The Mary Sue "factor" is a barricade between the author's protagonist and the reader. These are qualities of the character that repel that identification and prevent a reader from responding.

Mary Sue is about self-insertion, but it's also about writing ourselves not as we are, but as we wish we were. We write ourselves with all of the qualities we've coveted and lacked, that would have saved the day for us at various times in our lives. It can be as simple as having our character walk into a party and (unlike us) nobody else is wearing the same dress she is… and looking better in it than she does. (We've *all* been *there,* right?) Or perhaps rewriting the incident in which the guy who humiliated us in the high school hallway one horrible afternoon is instead flayed alive by *our* wit. (Don't we all have a collection of things we wish we'd said to some jerk, but didn't even think of until after the fight is over?)

But while we can all probably identify with being the one who looks like the "pathetic twin" in the fashion contest, or who was tongue-tied and devastated in a verbal match, and we all did wish we hadn't been… it's very hard to identify with a character who wins those things effortlessly. Because the truth about the human condition is that everybody – even the person we envy most of all – constantly struggles with *something*.

There are many professional writers who "get away" with writing Mary Sues. Anne McCaffrey comes to mind, as much as I love her writing. Many of her characters are a little too perfect, too glamorous, or too sweet and pure and innocent, and their battles are traditionally with someone who is a little too evil… and the result is that we're forced into sympathizing with a character we have trouble relating to, anyway, because her opponent has been rendered as a cartoon villain and we can hardly root for him/her. This was particularly noticeable for me when I was reading the "Crystal Singer" series (Carigana, Killashandra's antagonist who we were adamantly *not* to sympathize with, had many of the same personality traits that Killashandra herself had, and that we *were* to sympathize with) and in "DragonQuest" (Supervillains Kylara and Meron were so nasty and wicked to everybody, especially the poor, sweet heroine).

And a certain degree of self-insertion is inevitable – after all, the cardinal rule of writing a good story is "write what you know."

But that's often what does *not* happen with a Mary Sue. The author writes not about the things she understands, but about the things she's imagined and dreamed of but has no concrete experience with.

Her character is the wittiest girl ever, something she's always longed to be, but because *her* wit is what the character has to draw from, it falls flat for readers, because most of the material is still simplistic or recycled.

Her character is super-fashionable, owning all the clothes she's always longed after… and this gives her story a very short shelf-life because as fashions change, the clothes she dressed her character in go from being fashionable …to "five minutes ago" …to out-of-style …to laughable.

Her character has the body she's always dreamed of having… with none of the drawbacks. She has the little abdominal six-pack, but somehow never has to take time out of her busy world-saving schedule to get her butt into the gym… or she has 36DD breasts but strangely, no grooves in her shoulders from where her bra-straps bite in, and no back-aches. (In fact, she can go braless!)

Her character is a superintelligent scientist, but both the character and the writer mess up some basic science facts in the very first chapter. (And as an aside, this is the plague of science fiction, and part of why the genre as a whole doesn't get the credibility it deserves… just last night I watched a movie in which the ship's captain referred to not a "conversion table," but a "conversation table." And watching actors attempt to use slide-rules in 1950s z-movies is always good for a laugh.)

And above all, her character's flaws are unrealistic – the quick temper that somehow never makes people decide they're done with her is a perfect example – and somehow get redeemed by the story because they are

turned to her advantage in some way.

It's more interesting to feel – and empathize with – a character's deep insecurity, her sense that she's just been shown up by someone else, her awareness that a situation is totally out of her control and is probably going to stay that way… than to feel and empathize with a character who always knows exactly how to solve every crisis. And it's much more meaningful to us to hear the hero whisper "you're beautiful" to his lover, reassuring her insecurities, when we know that her insecurities are as valid as our own, and she doesn't look like the latest airbrushed Playmate Of The Month.

Mary Sue draws writers *to* her because she's the woman we all secretly wish we could be. But she also repels readers *from* her because she's *also* the woman we all secretly wish would drop dead.

August 22, 2003

Note: This was written in 2003, when I was churning out chapters of *Even Lions Have Their Pride* and it was getting a great deal of attention on fan boards. One issue I didn't begin to address, but which is worth mentioning in passing, is that the original creators of canon works have been paid (and hopefully paid well) for their stories, while the only form of payment that fan fiction authors receive, or in fact *can* receive in most cases, is credit for their personal contributions to the fandom's "Expanded Universe" and respectful treatment of that credit by other fans.

Fanficcing Fanfic:
The Quandary of Who Owns What and When

I was going to post this in a discussion thread about Anne Rice, but my reply got too long for LiveJournal, its original host, to allow. Anyway, it's less about the Anne Rice issue than about another issue… the writing of fanfiction *about* fanfiction.

A friend of mine said: *I was discussing with a friend about why fan fiction writers, who by default revel in taking others' characters and making new stories with them, get so anal if someone borrow their own characters, even with proper thanks or disclaimers etc*.

Interesting development there… I had someone approach me recently and ask me if she could write a companion piece to *Even Lions Have Their Pride,* from Riddick's POV.

I said no, but it wasn't out of the insecurity that she might somehow write it better… but because of the following:

I have a lot of plot twists coming up in future chapters of *Even Lions,* including aspects of Riddick and Jack's history together since the crash that have yet to be revealed, and things that happen to them, that I know but nobody else does. In terms of such things, I have a tendency to play my plots very "close to the chest." (I do have two confidants who know pretty much exactly what is coming, but that's it.)

I can't really say "yes, please write a story that might contradict/impede the narrative I'm planning on writing in the next chapters."

It might be something that I'll be amenable to after I *finish* the story and it's up in its established entirety, and I really am rather flattered that she wants to fanfic it, but it's not time yet for me to stand back and give a blessing to that.

I remember reading somewhere that George Lucas had given permission for the Expanded Universe authors to write their stories, but had also added certain provisions: they could not write their stories within certain time frames in the SW timeline, that he was planning on working/delving in himself, and nothing they wrote would become a part of movie canon.

I didn't understand why that was, until now, but now I do. There's a danger that comes with being fanficced — especially if you officially endorse the fanfic the way the published EU stories are essentially endorsed fanfic — that your future efforts, using the world you created, will be rejected because somehow the "fanon" elements now have greater weight in your audience's minds than your "canon" elements, and the places you want to take *your* world are no longer accepted by your audience.

Part of it, too, is that I don't actually know the woman who asked. If, for example, Artemis or LadyElaine or Shalimar or Ayabie (to name a few) expressed interest in doing a Riddick POV companion piece to *Even Lions,* I might be much more comfortable. Those are people I would feel comfortable discussing the back-story and future plot points with, and explaining what Riddick's as-yet-unrevealed motives, thoughts, and intentions are and how and when they can be revealed without spoilering *Even Lions* itself.

But otherwise, I can't endorse or be involved in the creation of fanfic on one of my ongoing works. I can't even *read* it because that would create a whole slew of conflicts — what if she contradicts my plotline? Or worse yet, what if she agrees with it, and telegraphs spoilers for some of my surprise twists before I can reveal them in my own time? I don't dare get involved.

The actual reason that Anne Rice became repressive about fanfic, from what I've been told, is one I can be sympathetic towards — a fanfic author sued her, claiming that Anne had stolen her story ideas. Yes, that's right… someone had taken Anne's universe and characters and had written a story based upon them that closely mirrored what Anne herself was planning on doing, and then sued claiming that *Anne* had stolen from *her.* I'm not sure if she won, but Anne definitely lost — the book in question was never published, and discarded. *

When *One Rule: Stay In the Light* was plagiarized, something similar happened to me. I had been working out the storyline for converting it into a longer work, when I discovered that the first chapter had been ripped off. The thief had then extrapolated and used some of the ideas I had planned on using, but had not posted yet… and despite the fact that those ideas would only work in the storyline *I* had created and she had *stolen,* I knew I couldn't use them now without running the risk that someone would call *me* a thief. I had to discard a lot of the work I'd been doing and rethink a lot of things.

So while I love movie and TV fanfic, I remain pretty iffy regarding book fanfic, especially fanfic on something that is still a work-in-progress, like a series of novels that the author might add to or expand upon… or an incomplete fanfiction like *One Rule* or *Even Lions*.

Of course, it's a little mindboggling, too, that someone wants to fanfic *me*. LOL!

October 1, 2003

*** Additional Correction:** I learned a few years later that the incident I referred to, allegedly involving Anne Rice, actually happened to author Marion Zimmer Bradley.