

THE *BAG* OF **Holding**

BY NANCY HOLDER



For last month's column, I interviewed YA fantasy editors, and as it happens, I found I had one more interview to use this month. What a happy accident! I was really struck by what Martha Mihalick had to say about defining “freshness” and encouraging authors to tell their own stories, even if they assume that they’ve already been done. Meanwhile, a family member’s career ambition is to become a Disney Imagineer, and in her reading came across the statement that everything that is done at Disney exists to serve “story, story, story.” I decided to explore how storytelling professionals other than prose writers work to serve story. Here, then, is the interview that inspired this column, and my two subsequent interviews—with my gratitude to all concerned.

Martha Mihalick, Associate Editor, Greenwillow Books: *Mistwood*; *Forget-Her-Nots*; *Me and the Pumpkin Queen*

IDEA INTO FORM

NH: What do you think draws readers to fantasy?

MM: A lot of people say that fantasy is escapism. To a certain extent, I agree with them; a fantasy takes us somewhere else, whether it’s an entirely new world, or a slightly different version of our own. But fantasy also brings us closer to ourselves, to what we believe and hold as truths. It takes big ideas—courage, good and evil, loyalty, determination—and sets them in a place where they are distilled and heightened. I think that’s what we’re drawn to: the story that gives us perspective on the things that we struggle with ourselves every day.

NH: What qualities in a fantasy novel appeal to you as an editor?

MM: I fall for fantasies that are richly layered and surprising; ones in which magic is not easy, but comes at a cost; and ones that show a twist on reality or on a story I’m already familiar with (such as a myth or fairy tale).

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— Martha Mihalick

NH: When editors say they want something that is “fresh,” what do they mean by that?

MM: I'm not sure I want to speak for *all* editors, but for me, “fresh” means that the story does something that surprises me. Or that makes me think, “Oh, I never thought of it *that* way before!” about a setting, a plot, an object, a character. . . .

NH: What is the one thing you wish you could tell aspiring authors of young adult literature in general, and of young adult fantasy specifically?

MM: Tell your story with confidence. Don't worry about what's already been done. Maybe your story is girl meets boy, or hero triumphs over villain—make it your own! You're creating your own characters and your own reality, and only you can do it that way. Find your voice and run with it. Take yourself seriously, but don't forget to laugh at yourself (and let your characters laugh at themselves), either.

NH: Would you mind naming 10 seminal works of fantasy that an aspiring author should read?

MM: Oh, wow. This is like picking favorites—nearly impossible. I'm not sure these are seminal, but they are certainly books that have informed my reading of fantasy:

Megan Whalen Turner's Attolia books: *The Thief*, *The Queen of Attolia*, *The King of Attolia*, and *A Conspiracy of Kings*

Tamora Pierce's Song of the Lioness quartet: *Alanna: the First Adventure*, *In the Hand of the Goddess*, *The Woman Who Rides like a Man*, and *Lioness Rampant*

Robin McKinley's *Beauty*

Robin McKinley's *The Blue Sword*

Diana Wynne Jones's *Howl's Moving Castle*

C. S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*

J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*

Madeleine L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time*

Neil Gaiman's *Stardust* or *American Gods*

Sammy Yuen, Jr., Associate Art Director, Simon and Schuster: *Leviathan*, *Wicked*, *Crusade*. Since going to press, Sammy Yuen, Jr., has gone freelance, though he will still design covers for Simon and Schuster and many other publishers. Here is his website address: <http://www.sammyyuen.com/>.

NH: Can you tell us your job title and describe what it is you do?

SY: I am an Associate Art Director. I design and illustrate covers for teen and middle grade books. I also design and develop websites and iPad apps related to books and authors.

NH: How do you conceptualize a book?

SY: The two things I like to do to conceptualize a book are: one, listen to the editor/art director describe the story and two, read at least the first half of the book. I really don't need to know how a book ends or get too specific in details because I really like the reader to imagine their own worlds based on the author's words.

NH: How do you decide what elements to incorporate into a cover?

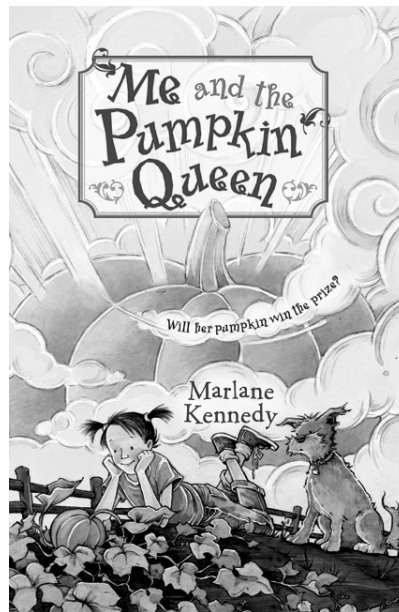
SY: I choose elements that can set tone, mood, time, and place of the story. I try to keep these elements iconic, atmospheric, and timeless.

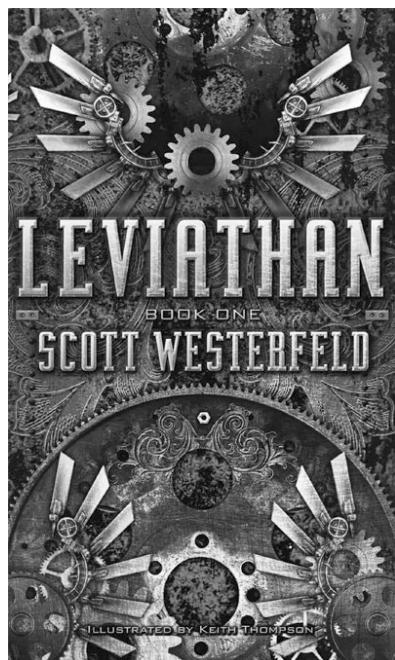
NH: Do you see images in your head and then transfer them to your medium? Do you plan out your cover or do you just start designing/drawing/painting?

SY: When I'm reading through a manuscript or listening to someone describe the story, I start to make a mental list of items or elements that could work for the cover. Once I have jotted down all my ideas, I do a little research on each element, then start sketching out quick thumbnails for composition. After my sketch is approved I start digging in and I start rendering the cover as tightly as possible.

NH: How do you know when something is finished?

SY: I actually never consider anything finished, especially in today's publishing environment. For example, you can send a jacket out for press proofs and find out someone wants a change or a whole new jacket. The jacket also changes a lot from hardcover to paperback.





NH: Why do the covers change from hardcover to paperback?

SY: They change mostly if the book doesn't meet sales expectation or to give something new life if it hasn't been around for a while. Hardcover is often more artistic, for lack of a better word, and paperback can be more mass market. Sometimes the publisher just misjudges the market as well, asking for a cover more teen than YA [for example.]

I always look back at my work and wish I could have done something a little differently, even if there are no changes requested.

NH: Do you think that writers could use some of your methods or techniques while they're writing a story/creating a world?

SY: The biggest advice I got when starting out was never edit yourself, i.e. hold back because you think someone may not like it, because as an artist your work by nature will go through many rounds of edits. If you start by catering to the masses you'll get something watered down and it will be hard to create anything groundbreaking or innovative with that approach. I also like to tell anyone creative to never give up. There are many different paths to achieving your goal, if one way does not work, change up what you're doing and try again.

NH: What are some elements that are tried and true selling points? For example, a romance editor once told me that putting a horse on a cover of specific types of romances would double sales. A mystery editor told me that images of cats on covers boost sales.

SY: For me I think it's important to create an author look or a brand look. For example, every time you see a cover with illustrated type you know it's an Ellen Hopkins book and you hope that it's going to be as good as her last one so you buy it.

NH: What do you wish you could tell writers?

SY: I would like to tell writers to keep up the great work. I humbly think you can learn or experience anything through a well-written book. I would also like to tell them that with all the new technology, this is a really exciting time to be in publishing because content will always be king and now all these new devices have allowed the audience to expand exponentially.

NH: Is there anything that writers could do to make your job easier/more interesting?

SY: One thing I really enjoy is hearing from the writers. My job becomes much more fulfilling when the author and I have genuine interest in each other.

NH: How do you design a cover for a book you don't like?

SY: If I don't like a book, it is most likely because I can't relate to it. In that case, I would either need to focus on what I had in common with the book or take a step back and out of my own shoes and see the book from the intended audience's point of view.

NH: What is something that you think will surprise writers about what you do?

SY: I get a lot of creative inspiration from watching movie trailers. I also love to read books about finance, business, entrepreneurs, and athletes. I find a lot of their stories motivational.

Craig Miller, Chairman of the WGA Animation Writers Caucus, TV Writer: *Curious George*; *The Hunger*; *Resistance*

NH: How do you select an idea to work on?

CM: When you work in television, there are two "sorts" of ideas: ideas for new series and ideas for episodes for current series. In either case you have to fit the market. Who's out there, who's buying, what are they looking for? Yes, you can strike out on any idea that comes to mind but if you can't figure out that there's a series or a channel for that story, then putting together a series bible or writing up a premise or outline probably is a waste of time. More freedom, of course, with series ideas.

NH: How do you think, "Yeah, this one works?" and how do you decide, "No, this isn't right."

CM: First, series. In fact I've just gone through this. I'm working with another writer. We decided we wanted to try to develop a new animated series to pitch. Some of the studios/networks we've been talking to are looking for "boys action"

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series. (Animation gets broken down as pre-school, boys' shows, and girls' shows, with the latter two broken down further into age groups—5-8, 8-12—and whether it's mainly comedy or action. Some shows straddle the lines: *Real Ghostbusters* was a comedy adventure show; *Beast Wars* was action.)

The other writer and I started generating ideas, bouncing concepts off each other as we sat in a restaurant over lunch. We came up with something—a two or three sentence idea that we thought was promising. We spent a couple hours that day and another afternoon filling in details, working up characters, ideas for set pieces and physical business coming to mind and getting written down. (Not, “hey, in some episode this character can do X” but more “the hero will do this whenever they want to use this ability”.)

Then we sat back and looked at it. Good stuff. But we just thought that it felt kind of dated; that it didn't feel special enough. So we decided to find something else.

We spent a little more time and my partner on this came up with a title. It was a great title; one that immediately gave you a sense of what the show was about and gave a sense of fun and adventure.

This got us excited and we started work. It came pretty quickly after that: who the characters are, their personalities, the sorts of adventures they get into, and all the rest. Right now we're waiting for an artist to finish some art to go into the presentation and we'll be taking it out to pitch.

NH: Does it feel like you wasted your time [re. the idea that seemed dated]?

CM: Yes and no. Frustrating that we came up with something that we weren't happy with, but we generated ideas within the general idea. Some of those ideas for characters or abilities or props will get included in something else. No idea is wasted.

NH: [Mentioning here that Craig and his writing partner have an artist to conceptualize the pitch.]

CM: The presentation is about 10 pages, plus however much the artwork adds. We chose it not because it's inherently a better idea than our first idea—both are good stories and leave lots of room for episodes. But the second idea just seemed fresher, more “contemporary”, and more marketable. It got us excited and that's probably the best way to judge what you should be working on.

When you're pitching ideas for episodes, you're playing in someone else's sandbox. There are, of course, equivalents in the prose world. In television, you're given a “bible” with the characters and their personalities, a description of the universe they live in, the props/tools/gadgets/etc. they use, etc. The writers job is to come up with a story idea that takes all of that, continues what

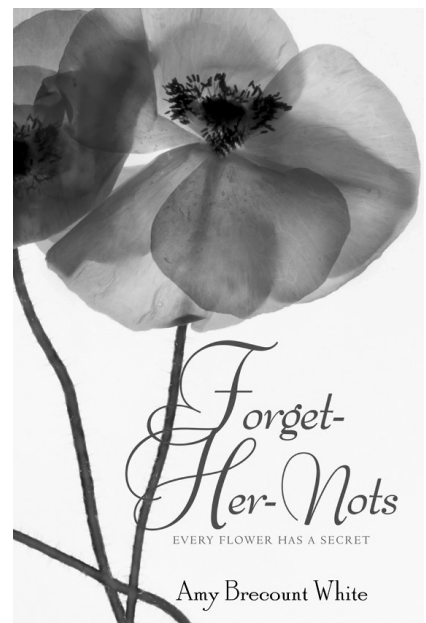
the creators and show runners have in mind, and, hopefully, expands it in a way that doesn't change or undercut the main idea. And you know the first five things you come up with will have been pitched by every writer that's gone before you.

(Several years ago, I was a showrunner on an animated series based on Real Musgrave's *Pocket Dragons*. So many writers pitched us stories about “the dragons use magic to clean up the castle and the spell goes wrong” that we had to include a note in the series bible to NOT do that.)

The best rule of thumb is to not bother submitting the ideas that seem obvious. They *are* obvious and everyone else is submitting them. Not only won't you sell them but you'll look better if you aren't seen as someone who pitches the same ideas as everyone else.

The other thing is to make sure the ideas you develop are about the main character/s. That's who the show's about. It's happened to me and it happens to all writers that we come up with an idea where you bring in a new character to get the plot rolling and then spend all your time dealing with that character. That's not who the audience is watching the series for. Television is all about the characters. In good stories, yes, most definitely, but the audience wants to see These Characters in the stories, not someone else. You don't read a Hercule Poirot story to see how some character you've never met before deals with the mystery. You want to see how Poirot deals with the situation, how his brain cells churn the facts to find a solution. The same is true for television. That new character brings the story to our hero/es and the story is about how they deal with it. So, again, it's making sure the stories you develop are about them.

What I like to do is find some aspect of a main character that's been established but never been explored. Or some stray bit of pipe that's been laid in their world and that makes the world more interesting but likewise, has never really been explored. Why doesn't Our Hero like pudding? Or guns? What does that bit of gibberish graffiti on the headquarters wall mean? Things that are part



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of our world but we don't know about. I like to come up with and explore stories that evolve some part of the show's existing world and give us more depth.

Some shows, of course, are more "story" driven. They just want to keep exploring the basic premise. "Monster of the week" or whatever. Then the trick is to come up with interesting ideas that aren't Just Another Ghost or Just Another Bank Robbery but bring in a completely

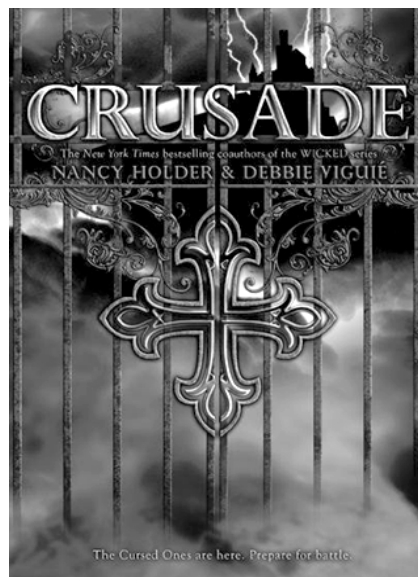
different sort of creature/activity or put a spin on it that's different, that adds an extra dimension. When I first started writing television, I wrote for the animated series *The Real Ghostbusters* and pitched and wrote the only episode where our heroes went out into space. The show didn't suddenly want to be about travel-

ing to Mars or invaders from Uranus, but a trip to an orbiting space station was close enough to "reality" that I could merge it with the concept of the series.

Having the marketplace so firmly in mind makes the television field feel restrictive—and in many ways it is. But it also means you have to use your creative engine to find ways to make your stories interesting and different from what everyone else is going to be pitching, yet still comfortable enough that they fit into what the audience is looking forward to when they tune in to a favorite show.

My thanks to these hard-working and busy folks for taking the time to respond to me. I'd love to hear your thoughts about conceptualizing ideas; feel free to contact me at nancyholder123@gmail.com.

Nancy Holder's new series, *CRUSADE*, written with Debbie Viguie, will debut in September. The cover is by Sammy Yuen, Jr.



About the Cover Artist

Ray VanTilburg

Raymond VanTilburg is a self taught artist who started creating fantastical images when he was old enough to pick up a crayon. He has painted covers for magazines, games, and product packages, and has created logos for science fiction and fantasy conventions around the world. Many people know him as "that guy who airbrushes T-shirts" in the dealers room at Worldcon. In addition, he's handled the souvenirs for Chicon V; Chicago in 2000; Chicago in 2012 Bid; Interaction Glasgow; and Anticipation, the Montreal Worldcon.

Ray began selling paintings in the science fiction market at his first convention, Inconjunction in 1980. It didn't take long for him to realize that more people could afford a T-shirt than a painting, so he learned to screen print and started selling his art on T-shirts.



For years Ray survived on five hours of sleep a night while working two full-time jobs—one to bring in that steady paycheck and benefits, and the other at his own company, OffWorld Designs, Inc. During that time he also raised four kids.

In 2003, Ray moved to Sandwich, IL, and expanded OffWorld to include a 10-color automatic press and a room full of embroidery equipment. OffWorld is now his only job and the company decorates apparel for game companies and all manner of fan groups. OffWorld Designs now employs 10 people and attends more than 40 events a year.

Ray's passions remain art and air-cooled VWs, and he's done some fabulous car show designs. Originally, OffWorld sold only Ray's art, but has expanded recently to include designs by a small group of other artists. Visit the company's web site at: www.offworlddesigns.com to see more of Ray's work and to check out the convention listing for links to all of the shows at which OffWorld is scheduled to appear.

