
Ingrid's Notes

... musings on creative writing and craft ...

APRIL 25, 2011 BY INGRIDSUNDBERG

Bruce Coville's Eight Tips for Fantasy Writers



(<https://ingridsnotes.files.wordpress.com/2011/04/bruce-coville-books.jpg>).

Bruce Coville author of almost 100 books for children spoke at the 2011 SCBWI Writer's Day. Among his many insights he shared these eight tips for writing fantasy novels and stories:

1) **Know the Rules**

- There must be rules and structures and limitations in your book.
- When anything is possible, nothing is interesting.
- Solving a problem with wits is always more interesting than solving it with powers.
- Superman must have kryptonite! Otherwise there are no weaknesses.

2) **Humor is Always Welcome**

- No matter how serious your book is, humor can be a part of it and help.
- We often deal with tragic things through humor. It holds the dark at bay.
- Kids use humor to get out of trouble.
- The best jokes arise out of character.

3) **Do Your Research**

- The best fantasy writers do the best research.
- You better know your lore, because you'd better bet your reader knows it.
- You can break the rules (lore, etc.) but do it with intent. You have to know it first, too.
- Research can often help you find the solution to a story problem.
- You have an obligation to do your research.
- Beware of the carbon copy of a carbon copy. Avoid contemporary works for research.

<https://ingridsnotes.files.wordpress.com/2011/04/bruce-coville-last-hunt1.jpg>) **Use Sidekicks**

- Sidekicks are your character's friend. They are also the writer's friend.
- Sidekicks offer up a lot of juice and fun for the story.
- Think about the use of sidekicks in Disney movies or The Wizard of Oz.
- They provide comic relief!
- Sidekicks tend to be mono-dimensional, with larger than life personalities. They are drawn with bold lines, have quirky speech patterns, and if you need to you can always kill one off (and the reader will care).
- The mono-dimensional quality will contrast nicely to your multidimensional protagonist (this of course relates to the length of your story. Shorter stories can get away with mono-dimensional sidekicks. Longer stories need to flesh out sidekicks.)



5) **Start at Home**

- A magical story always needs to start in the backyard and then move to the other-world.
- Ground your reader in the world your character is familiar with then move to the magical world.
- Lord of the Rings starts in the Shire.
- Harry Potter starts with the Dursley's house.
- Chronicles of Narnia begins in England.
- The call to adventure is when your character is pulled into the other-world.

6) **Retain a Sense of Mystery**

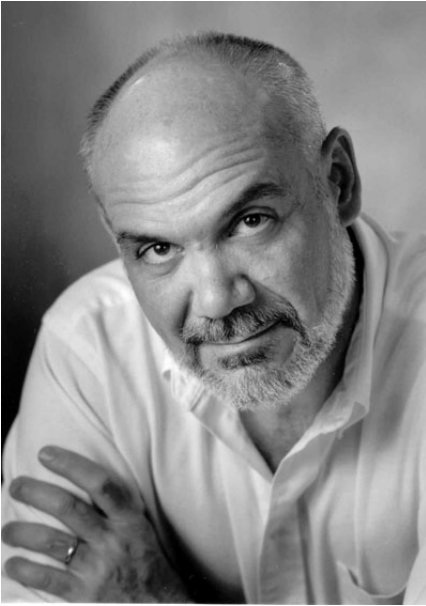
- We long for awe and mystery, and the mystery of a presence.
- We like the questions.

7) **Strive for the Numinous**

- Look for the sacred.
- We want a sense of world that is beyond the fields of the world we know.

8) **Master the Art of Naming**

- Use a poet's art and a linguistics art.
- Words have power, strength, and weight. They have a sense of presence.
- Example: Mordor → Mor = Darkness
- Be masterful with your naming and not cheap. Beware the "clang of brass versus the cling of silver." Beware of the clone of literature that will clang your words.
- Play with the sounds to find the right names.



(<https://ingridsnotes.files.wordpress.com/2011/04/brucecoville.jpg>) Bruce Coville is the author of nearly 100 books for children and young adults, including the international bestseller *My Teacher is an Alien* and the wildly popular *Unicorn Chronicles*. Bruce has been a teacher, toymaker, magazine editor, gravedigger, and a cookware salesman. His books have won Children's Choice Awards in over a dozen states, including Vermont, Connecticut, Nevada and California. His books have been translated into nearly 20 languages. Learn more about Bruce Coville and his books at his website: <http://www.brucecoville.com/books.asp> (<http://www.brucecoville.com/books.asp>).

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6 thoughts on “*Bruce Coville’s Eight Tips for Fantasy Writers*”

[Lindsay Edmunds](#) | [April 25, 2011 at 6:45 pm](#)

I like “strive for the numinous.” A fantasy story without the depth provided rules 6 and 7 is only a collection of magic tricks.

[Reply](#)

[Laura](#) | [April 25, 2011 at 7:20 pm](#)

This was a great post. I especially agree about the sidekicks — I just love to write them! There's nothing I hate worse than reading a book where the hero/heroine does everything by themselves. That leads to page after page of exposition with no possibility of dialog. Bor-ring!

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[PK Hrezo](#) | [April 26, 2011 at 5:18 pm](#)

This is such an awesomely helpful post. I'm storing it away for reference right now.

Reply

Heidi | **April 26, 2011 at 10:09 pm**

Very motivating! According to these tips, I think I'm on the right track. Now, to kill a sidekick....

Reply

Katrina Lantz | **April 28, 2011 at 1:20 am**

Loved this post! I especially loved the deeper, "Look for the sacred" and I just wrote a post about the importance of names. It's really fun coming up with meaningful ones, though it definitely takes some real effort. Thanks for the thorough refresher!

Reply

Natalie Aguirre | **April 28, 2011 at 10:09 pm**

I loved this post. I saw Bruce at a SCBWI conference with Bruce Hale & Michael Stearns. He and they were so funny. I can see why he emphasizes humor.

Reply