

Writing Queer SFF

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This is the hand-out for a seminar I gave for the CWC on writing queer characters and SFF. My contact info is at the end of this file – please feel free to get in touch if you have any questions!

About Scott:

Scott lives with his husband Mark in a yellow bungalow in Sacramento. He was indoctrinated into fantasy and sci fi by his mother at the tender age of nine. He devoured her library, but as he grew up, he wondered where all the people like him were.

He decided that if there weren't queer characters in his favorite genres, he would remake them to his own ends.

A Rainbow Award winning author, he runs Queer Sci Fi, QueerRomance Ink, and Other Worlds Ink with Mark, sites that celebrate fiction reflecting queer reality, and is a full member of the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America (SFWA).

Writing LGBTQ+ Characters Without Appropriating Queer Culture

We all write characters who are not like us. We write other genders, other races, people of other cultures. In sci fi and fantasy, we write aliens and elves without blinking. So why is writing LGBTQ+ characters so scary?

Yes, It's Scary

Don't get me wrong. It's scary for me too. I have gay characters down cold—personal experience and all that. And I've written lesbian characters for years. But writing trans, bi, non-binary and the rest? It used to scare the crap out of me.

Go Diverse, But Don't Make Identity the Struggle

Then I got some great advice at a con. If you're not x identity, don't write a story about a character dealing with issues springing from that identity. This isn't to say that a cisgender writer can never write about the struggles of someone transgender as they transition, nor does it mean that a straight author can't write convincingly about a gay character's coming out

process. It just means that it will be a lot harder for those writers to get it “right” than for some one of that identity to do so.

So especially when you’re just starting out, add a character (or two or three) outside your normal comfort zone to your WIP. Make them gay, or non-binary, or sapiosexual (see the identity list at the end) but don’t make that their struggle. Have them battle the invading aliens, or set off on a quest, or square off against the IRS. Make their LGBTQ+ identity important but not the thing their struggling with.

But what about all those pitfalls you’ve heard about? I’ve got your back.

Don’t Fall Into These Negative Tropes and Pitfalls

There are a bunch of ways you can offend your LGBTQ+ readers, but luckily you have me here to help you avoid them. In no particular order:

Bury Your Gays: Hollywood in particular has a long and sordid history of killing off queer characters, but publishing hasn’t been immune to it either. Early stories about gays and lesbians often ended up with them committing suicide from the sheer despair of being... well... gay. This is not to say you can never kill of a queer character in one of your books. Just give it due consideration, and make sure you’re not killing off the only queer character in your story.

Othering Your Queer Character: Another common negative trope is making the queer character an alien. “See, they’re non-binary BECAUSE they’re aliens!” Yes, they may be, but again, if your only LGBTQ+ character is a demon, you might ruffle reader feathers.

The Gay Best Friend: We don’t see this one so often anymore, but for years, it was the only way we got a queer character. Often they were over-the-top gay, and never got any real action (plot or sex). Give your queer characters agency in your story. Don’t just make them props.

The United Colors of Benneton: Remember those old Benneton ads? A child in every color! Many authors go overboard when striving for diversity, and end up writing stories that come off as diversity checklists. It’s often better to choose one or two queer character identities, especially at first. Less can be more.

The Promiscuous Bi Character: This is a common rookie mistake when writing bi characters. Show they’re bi by having them sleep with both men and women in your story. This is a lazy way to go about it, and implies that bi folks are promiscuous. There are more subtle ways to go about it, including who they notice and how they interact with both men and women in your story. A bi character can be in a long-term relationship with a man (or a woman) and still be bi.

Deadnaming: If you’re not familiar with this one, it’s when you intentionally call a transgender person by their birth name. It implies that their gender isn’t real, and is one of the worst insults you can deliver to a trans person. If you use this in a story, be aware of the negative power it has.

It's Not "Transgenderers": Transgender is an adjective. The proper term is transgender woman/man or trans woman/man. You may also hear FTM or MTF – Female to Male or Male to Female.

It's Not "Homosexual": Technically, yes, I'm a homosexual. But the word has a long history, and a very negative connotation. Use "gay" instead.

It's Not "Hermaphrodite": Again, a very clinical word for a human being. The preferred term these days is "intersex" person.

Not a Choice or a Lifestyle: A couple more negative buzzwords. I didn't choose to be gay. A trans man didn't choose to be transgender. Yes, some characters in your story might use this framing intentionally to hurt a queer character, but be aware of the implications if you use this approach.

How Can I Avoid These And Other Pitfalls?

I'm a big fan of writers stretching themselves and writing outside both their own experience and their comfort zone. But when you go out on a limb, sometimes someone saws it off.

Your best defense is to work with someone who knows the community/culture/identity you're writing about better than you do. In general, readers who help improve a story before it's published are called "beta readers" (some folks have "alpha readers" too, who read parts of a story earlier in the writing/editing process). If we're employing a beta reader specifically to help us navigate a particular character's cultural, sexual, or gender identity, etc, we call them "sensitivity readers."

Think of them like a canary in the coal mine who can warn you before you make a fatal choice.

In *The Rising Tide*, I wrote my first deaf character, so I found some folks in the deaf community to help me get the details right. In *Wonderland*, it was a character with OCD, so I found both patients and therapists who dealt with obsessive-compulsive disorder.

A sensitivity reader can flag questionable things about your character and the way you wrote them, helping you correct them before your story reaches the general public.

How do you find them? I usually ask in one of the FB groups I'm a part of. Here are a few you can try for LGBTQ+ character identities:

QueerRomance Ink: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/queeromanceink/>

QueerSciFi Writer's Workshop: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/qsfwritersworkshop/>

LGBTQ+ Writers and Readers: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/7108729185/>

Be specific with your beta readers – what kind of help are you looking for? Do you want line by line feedback or a general summary of their opinions/findings? The clearer you are about what you're looking for, the better the feedback will likely be.

I also recommend having 3-4 sensitivity readers, if possible. There are many different ways to be gay, or intersex, or transgender, etc, and a wider field will help you present a more rounded character and avoid putting your foot in it.

Writing Sci-Fi and Fantasy

I've been reading sci-fi and fantasy since about age nine. In third grade, I was reading at a twelfth-grade level, and finished the Lord of the Rings by fourth grade.

Fantasy and sci-fi fall under the umbrella of speculative fiction – literally fiction that speculates on what might be. Some of the best sci-fi, in particular, takes what we know about today and extrapolates it forward in an interesting and compelling way.

But as with writing queer identities, there are a number of pitfalls you should probably avoid when writing your spec fic masterpiece.

TVTropes.org has a massive list of overused sci-fi tropes:

<https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Website/OverusedSciFiPlotDevices>

While HobbyLark.com has a nice list of some common, overused fantasy ones:

<https://hobbylark.com/writing/cliches-to-avoid-in-your-fantasy-novel>

Tropes are not inherently bad. Think of them as the basic building blocks used to construct a plot. And don't despair when reading these lists. Instead, spend a little time thinking how you might write a story that subverts the trope.

If you're writing a story about a sword in the stone, what if the stone were the most important part, and stupid Boy Arthur isn't smart enough to see it, but Girl Adelaide can?

Or how about a story about a massive conspiracy that everyone's in on, and the secret is how to not be a part of it?

Subverting tropes can give you power as a writer, a way to make your story stand out from the 50,000 run-of-the-mill books that tell the same story in basically the same way.

Look at The Mists of Avalon. Yes, the author and her husband did some despicable things. But the story was genius – a retelling of the Arthurian legends where the women were the heroes.

Find a trope you like and turn it inside out.

Self-Publishing Tips and Tricks

These are covered in the handout “Being Your Own Writer Boss,” but I’ll be glad to take questions on this at the end.

OWI’s Little Black Book

Mark and I do blog tours and book marketing, and have prepared some tips and tricks and a great glossary of terms and list of LGBTQ+ identities in our *Little Black Book*. We’ll include a pdf of the book with the seminar materials.

LGBTQ+ Publishers

Bella Books

<http://www.bellabooks.com>

Genres: Sci fi, fantasy, paranormal, horror

Orientation/Relationships: FF

Blind Eye Books

<http://www.blindeyebooks.com>

Genres: Sci fi, fantasy, paranormal, horror

Orientation/Relationships: MM

Bold Strokes Books

<http://www.boldstrokesbooks.com>

Genres: Sci fi, fantasy, paranormal, horror

Orientation/Relationships: LGBTIQA

Desert Palm Press

<http://www.desertpalmexpress.com>

Genres: Sci fi, fantasy, paranormal, horror

Orientation/Relationships: FF

Dreamspinner Press

<http://www.dreamspinnerpress.com>

Genres: Sci fi, fantasy, paranormal, horror

Orientation/Relationships: MM (including trans MM)

J. Ellington Ashton

<http://www.jellingtonashton.com>

Genres: Sci fi, fantasy, paranormal, horror

Orientation/Relationships: LGBTIQA

Lethe Press

<http://www.lethepressbooks.com>

Genres: Sci fi, fantasy, paranormal, horror

Orientation/Relationships: LGBTIQA

Midnight Hour Publishing

https://www.facebook.com/MidnightHourPublishing/info?tab=page_info

Genres: Sci fi, fantasy, paranormal, horror

Orientation/Relationships: LGBTIQA

Mischief Corner Books

<http://www.mischiefcornerbooks.com>

Genres: Sci fi, fantasy, paranormal, horror; Anthologies and LGBTQI Quarterly

Orientation/Relationships: Anthologies - MM; Quarterly - LGBTIQA

NineStar Press

<https://www.ninestarpublishing.com>

Genres: Romance, erotica, literary fiction - all genres

Orientation/Relationships: LGBTIQA

Purple Horn Press

<http://www.purplehornpress.com>

Genres: Sci fi, fantasy, paranormal, horror. We are a romance publisher, and stories must feature a dominant romantic plot as a central element of the story.

Orientation/Relationships: We have an acknowledged gay/bi male focus. That means most of our stories are going to be M/M or M/M/M. But as an LGBT press, there's an alphabet soup that covers way more than simple gay/bi male. Make it a good story, make it a queer story. If you don't submit it, we can't consider it.

Queen of Swords Press

<https://queenofswordspublishing.com/>

Genres: Fantasy, gothic horror, historical fiction, science fiction; some romance; no YA

Orientation/Relationships: LGBTIQA

Riptide Publishing

<http://www.riptidepublishing.com/>

Genres: Sci fi, fantasy, paranormal, horror

Orientation/Relationships: LGBTIQA

Sapphire Books

<http://www.sapphirebooks.com>

Genres: Sci fi, fantasy, paranormal, horror

Orientation/Relationships: FF

Shadoe Publishing

<http://shadoepublishing.com>

Genres: Sci fi, fantasy, paranormal, horror

Orientation/Relationships: Mostly FF, some MM

Supposed Crimes LLC

<http://www.supposedcrimes.com/Fiction/anthology-submissions/>

Genres: Sci fi, post apocalyptic; LGBT Fiction; esp. "women doing violence"; no YA

Orientation/Relationships: LGBTIQA

Totally Bound

<https://www.totallybound.com/genre/futuristic-and-science-fiction>

Genres: Sci fi, fantasy, paranormal, horror; erotic

Orientation/Relationships: LGBTIQA

Ylva Publishing

<http://ylva-publishing.co.uk>

Genres: Sci fi, fantasy; lesbian fiction, not romance

Orientation/Relationships: Lesbian Fiction

Contact Me

Have any questions about my presentation or the info in this file? Reach out to me:

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