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A Grand Adventure by Andrew McGahan

With the approaching publication of The War of the Four Isles, I’m now three books into the Ship Kings series, with just one left to go – and there are a few questions that I can finally begin to answer. First, what has the transformation been like, going from being a writer of stand alone adult novels to a writer of a YA fantasy series?

The most obvious difference is that I have never been busier, or struggled so much to meet deadlines. My first six novels, for example, came out at the rather leisurely pace of one every two or three years. (This wasn’t just from idleness. I was also occupied with film and theatre back in those days.) But when I started Ship Kings I promised the publishers that I’d produce the four volumes at the astonishing (for me) speed of one per year.

It was a commitment I made rather blithely, as my intent was to keep each book very short and simple. Book 1, for instance, The Coming of the Whirlpool, is only seventy thousand words long. And to my credit I actually did adhere to the timetable for Book 2, which was released exactly a year after the first, even though The Voyage of the Unquiet Ice is somewhat longer than Whirlpool, at well over ninety thousand words.

But with Book 3 I’ve fallen down completely, no matter how hard I’ve laboured to keep pace. Four Isles weighs in at one hundred and thirty thousand words, near twice as long as Book 1, and is launching eight months behind schedule. Nor can I kid myself that I’ll get Book 4 done in a single year either. There’s nothing so unusual in any of this, of course – a writer missing deadlines. Still, it’s one thing I wasn’t expecting, that entering the YA world would make my workload go up so dramatically.

The second point to note is that I still don’t particularly feel – even after three books – that I actually am in the YA world. That’s in part because I never precisely conceived Ship Kings as being for younger readers in the first place. It was more just that I wanted to write fantasy in a clean and classic style; a grand adventure for adventure’s sake, where the pleasure lies as much in the wondrousness of the created world, in its mood and tone, as it does in the twists of the narrative. An innocent style of fantasy, you could say – not without cruelty and brutality, of course, but not dwelling on them either.

It’s a style that certainly lends itself to the younger end of the Young Adult category, and I’m happy for Ship Kings to have its home there. But interestingly, to judge by reviews of the first two books, the series might in fact appeal more to adult readers than it does to younger ones. Which is not to say that younger readers don’t like it, but adult reviewers in particular appear to connect with the Four Isles world; it seems to carry them back to their own childhoods, and to other fondly remembered books from their past. Which makes me wonder a little: am I actually writing Adult Nostalgia fantasy, rather than strictly YA fantasy?

But that’s a debate for another day. We’ll stick with calling it YA for now. And a third question to ask is this: is the writing process for YA any different from the process for straight adult fiction?

Well … I have noticed that there’s less subtext in Ship Kings than in any of my adult books; less manipulation of underlying themes, less consciousness of symbolism and so on, which does make the writing a slightly more straightforward and less mind-bending process. But that’s really a product of the story being a pure adventure, as opposed to it being a YA tale. Plenty of Young Adult novels, after all, are positively dripping with subtext – and plenty of adult fantasy novels have scarcely a drop to be seen.

Also, I’ve possibly had more sheer fun writing Ship Kings than I’ve had writing anything else. That’s not to suggest I didn’t take joy in all the other books – I most certainly did – but I can’t deny that there’s a special boy’s-own thrill in conjuring up the marvels and monsters that Dow Amber encounters in his voyages. And in getting to draw the maps!

But otherwise, no, there’s no difference. The basic craft doesn’t change. Outlandish fantasy adventure or earnest literary tome, it takes just as much effort and sweat to get a sentence right.

A fourth question is one I was pondering even as I began Ship Kings – would I get bored with the story halfway through? Albeit, a strong motivation to even try my hand at the series was that I was getting frustrated with the
brevity of one-off novels, and was eager to stay with a set of characters through a much longer period – but I was worried too that I might get sick of them before the series was done. Has that happened?

Not at all. The books have become progressively harder to write, admittedly, but it’s not because of boredom – rather the reverse, as the world of the Four Isles, only narrowly described in Book 1, expands and expands; the struggle is one of knowing when to stop! As for our hero, Dow Amber, I’ve written about him more extensively now than any other character I’ve ever created. But to my pleasant surprise he isn’t palling on me. After all, he’s hardly the same person book by book; he’s grown through the series from age eleven at the start of Book 1 to age nineteen by Book 3, and he’s been forcibly matured along the way by a wealth of experience, good, bad, terrifying and ecstatic; with the most wrenching events still to come!

Finally, there’s the sea. The prime genesis of Ship Kings lies in my life-long love of old sea tales, and in wanting to write my own – nevertheless, I did wonder if a four book series might be overkill. But even after three volumes of voyaging among whirlpools, storms, icebergs, eruptions, sea monsters, doldrums, epic battles and other assorted wonders, I still haven’t sated my appetite for describing the Great Ocean of the Four Isles world, where water behaves not quite like our own. Indeed, in my spare time, I’ve been lobbing short stories onto the series’ website, just to explore bits of that world that the novels can’t cover. And as I begin work on Book 4, The Ocean of the Dead, I’m looking forward to visiting even stranger parts of the Great Ocean yet.

So I needn’t have worried. In total, it will probably be fully a six year journey from start to finish by the time I wrap the series up – a sizable chunk of my writing life. And yes, I’m sure that I’ll be glad by then that it’s over. But I can also tell, even now, that I’ll miss Ship Kings when it’s gone.