

Occupational Hazard

A Workshop by David Keener



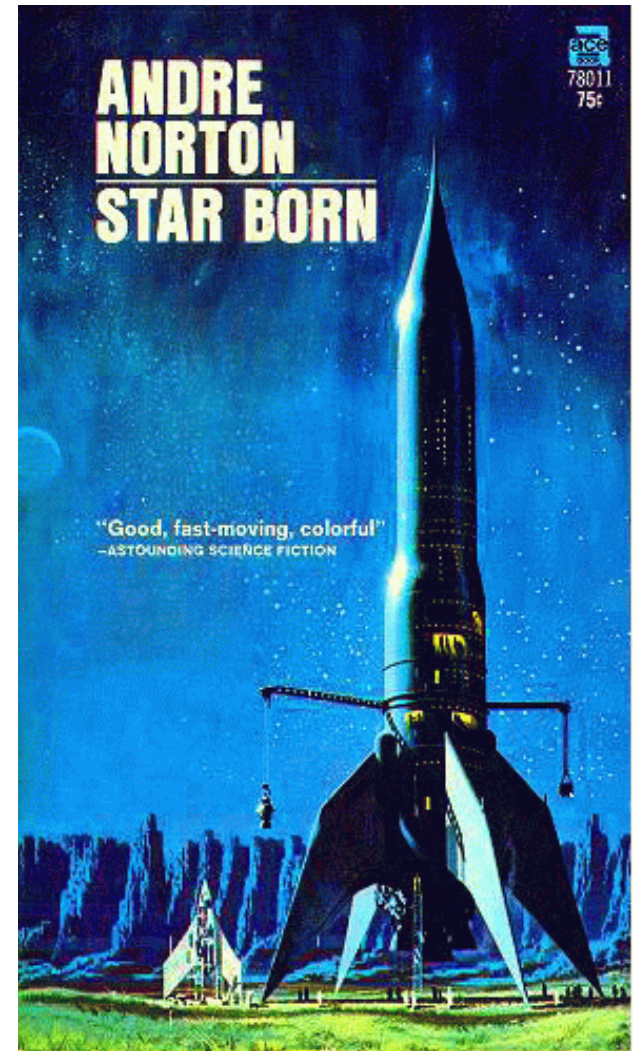
Capclave 2022 | Rockville, MD | Sep 30 – Oct 2
Workshop: Sunday, 10:00 AM, Oct 2

Agenda

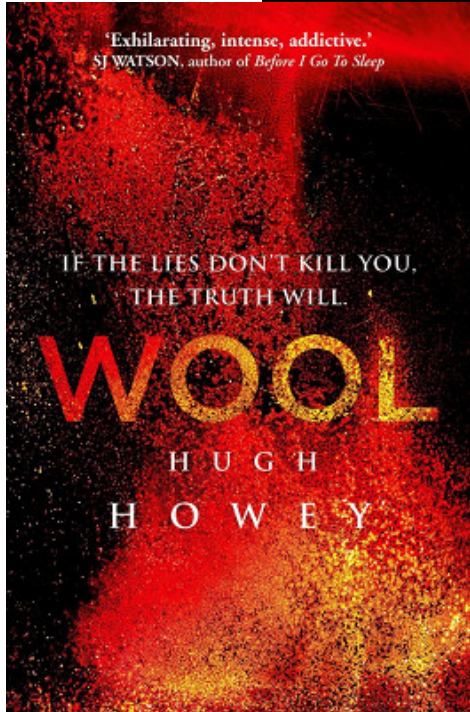
- Introduction
- Ideation
 - With Exercises
- Break (10:55 AM - 11:00 AM)
- Further Development
 - With Exercises
- Wrap-Up
- Utterly Shameless Plug

About Me

- Knew I wanted to be a writer when I was 10
 - Andre Norton was YA before YA was a thing
- Then Life got in the way...
 - Too many Gatekeepers in publishing
 - Too much money in my Day Job
- So I ran role-playing games
 - Lots of world-building
 - Complex storylines, like interactive novels



Then I Met This Guy in 2012...



About Me (2)

- I started writing seriously
 - Found a great Writing Group
 - Ran writing exercises & workshops for them
- Ran first convention workshop: 2014
 - Capclave 2014: Public Speaking for Writers
 - My way of “giving back”
- First anthology appearance: 2015
- First published book: 2017
- First published anthology: 2017



Where Do Stories Come From?

Interview enough writers and you'll find that the inspiration for stories can come from almost anywhere...

Often the writer starts out with just a single idea...a social issue, a character, a technological development...

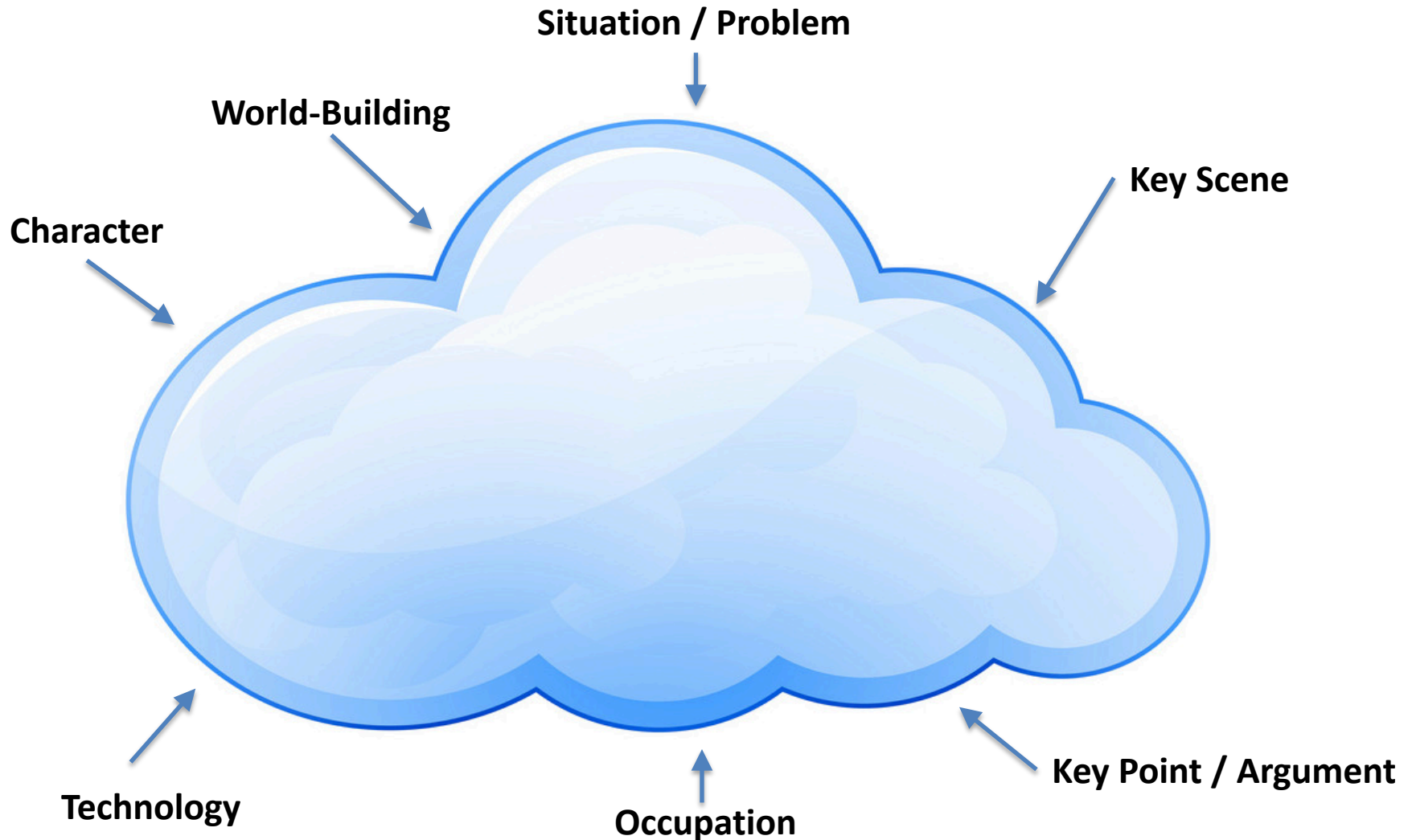
Slowly, writers accrete details in their minds until the pieces coalesce as a story...

Ideas

Ideas are funny things...

- Some of them are domineering
 - Do something with me, or else!
- Some are like soap bubbles
 - Fragile and easily lost
- Ideas can can come from anywhere
 - But stories usually result from the collision, or synthesis, of multiple ideas

The Genesis of a Story May Be...



Possible Starting Points (1)

- Character
 - Married nurse in WWII goes back in time and falls in love with a Scottish lord (Outlander)
- World-Building
 - Middle-Earth...we're lucky we got ANY stories
- Situation / Problem
 - Classic locked room mystery is an example
- Key Scene
 - *On Basilisk Station*: (by David Weber) Entire novel is the setup for a climactic battle scene

Possible Starting Points (2)

- Key Point / Argument
 - *War of the Worlds*: A brutal commentary on British colonialism (a social issue)
- Occupation
 - Space janitors, space pirates, bounty hunters, salvage experts
- Technology
 - What if we had perfect matter duplication?

Occupational Ideation

- We're going to start with an occupation...a job
- We'll imagine the kind of person who might take on that job
- Before you know it, we might even have a story struggling to be born...just by picking an interesting occupation

Exercise 1: Three Jobs

- Come up with three jobs
 - Don't hold back
 - Have fun
 - Go wild

Examples

- Dragon Killer
- Inquisitor (SF)
- Bodyguard
- Pilot for Rebellion
- Therapist for Robots & Androids
- Forensic Mage
- Solar Yacht Racer

Example: My Three Jobs

- Courier
 - Delivers “stuff” in a Fantasy world
- Cleaner
 - After the wizards fight, somebody has to clean up the mess
- Dragon Tamer
 - Like breaking a bronco, but with the chance of getting eaten, burned, or crushed

Exercise 2: Bullet Points

- For each job, come up with a few bullet points describing the job
 - SF or Fantasy (or Horror or Paranormal or...)
 - What does the job entail? (at a high level)

Example Job 1: Courier

Courier:

- Lives in a gritty Fantasy realm
- Securely transfers contracts and other documents by memorizing them and then traveling to the recipient
- It's not unheard of for couriers to be killed or tortured.
- Inspired a bit by "Johnny Mnemonic," but in a Fantasy world

Example Job 2: Cleaner

Cleaner:

- Gritty Fantasy realm with common magic
- Somebody has to clean up magic “stuff” after wizard duels and magical battles
 - Curses, accidentally released demons, etc.
- Detective / Crime stories

Example Job 3: Dragon Tamer

Dragon Tamer:

- Dragons have a pecking order
- They're intelligent and can be integrated into society...
- But only if they are taught that they are not the top of the food chain by a human.
- A dragon tamer's job is to drive that lesson home...or kill the dragon.

Exercise 3: Choose a Favorite

Choose one occupation to focus on...

- The one that resonates the most with you...
- And feels like it might have the most story potential

If it's not obvious by now, we're choosing one Occupation for further development

Example Selection: The Cleaner

Why did I pick this one?

- Seemed very unique
- I really liked the concept
- Felt like a cross-genre mashup
 - Potential for Action, Crime, Mystery, Horror
 - Maybe even a CSI vibe

Some Observations

- You haven't yet defined the character who's going to take on this Occupation
 - Could be a Protagonist, Supporting Character, or just an interesting walk-on
- Some things may already be coming into focus for the character who is *in* the job
 - Gender, species, etc.
 - Background details

Exercise 4: Job Goal

Let's start defining *somebody* and his or her goal(s) related to the job

Example Goals

- Get the Job
- Make money
- Become famous
- Improve their skills
- Be the best (with possible rivals)
- Just survive
- To change things
- Revenge

Example Goal: The Cleaner

- Wants to protect people from monsters
 - Because of some trauma in her past
 - Job involves hunting demons, defusing curses, etc.
- A woman in a field dominated by men
 - Has an element of “proving” herself
 - Has an underdog tone; and she’s often underestimated
- I’m feeling a Victorian vibe for the society

Break

Exercise 5: Why?

What makes the character want to do this job?

It's likely that thinking about the character's motivations will also start suggesting more details about the character filling this job. If so, write them down.

Example Motivations: The Cleaner

- Was a victim of runaway magic as a child
 - Feels that somebody has to do the job...
 - Due to Key Incident from her childhood
 - And *she's* damn good at it
- Take care of her younger sister
 - Who she protected in Key Incident
- Follow her step-father
 - A “cleaner” who adopted her after Key Incident

Challenges

Every job has its problems, i.e. – challenges that need to be overcome

- A rival or nemesis
- A rating board
 - [Bar exam, rules org](#)
- Changes in the field
- New Technologies
- Competition of some sort
- Social disapproval

Exercise 6: External Factors

What challenges...external factors...are blocking the character from achieving their job goal(s)?

Example Challenges: The Cleaner

- Demons are challenging
 - Dangerous
 - Operate by a Code: Legalistic, Status, Hierarchy
- Loose Demons
 - Already free demons who want to “recruit” others
- Short-sighted bureaucratic problems
 - The demon’s been free for *how long*?
- Factional government infighting

What Have We Done?

- We've created a Character...
 - By focusing on an Occupation...
 - And building out by asking Key Questions
-
- You can do this for Protagonists
 - Or Supporting Characters
 - Or Villains

Remember...

Friends don't let friends
do Cardboard Characters!

The Cleaner

Jonelle Crosse is...
“the Cleaner”

Appearing for the
1st time in...

*Fantastic
Detectives*



Conclusion

The chances are that, just by diving deep into an interesting occupation, you may have...

- Created an interesting character
- Begun imagining a world or society in which that character might reside
- Started generating some story possibilities

There are lots of ways to approach Character Creation and Story Development. This is just one of them.

Questions

<http://www.davidkeener.org>



dkeener@davidkeener.org

Credits



Image licensed from Deposit Photos.



An extract from the cover for *Fantastic Detectives*, cover art by Ivan Zann.



Cover art for Andre Norton's *Star Born*, one of the key books that made me realize at an early age that I wanted to be a writer. Art by Dean Ellis. Believed to be in the public domain.



One of the numerous covers for Hugh Howey's breakout indie-published bestseller, *Wool*.



Hugh Howey and I at dinner at an Irish pub during the 2012 Worldcon in Chicago. He'd just changed my life by educating me about indie publishing.



A brilliant picture of me taken by Edmond Joe in May 2015 at the District 29 Toastmasters Spring Conference. I was running A/V for the conference. This is near the end of the day, all is well, and I'm watching the show. Pretty much the same feeling I have when a successful workshop is over.