



STRONG STORIES NEED STRONG HEROES

A WORKSHOP BY DAVID KEENER

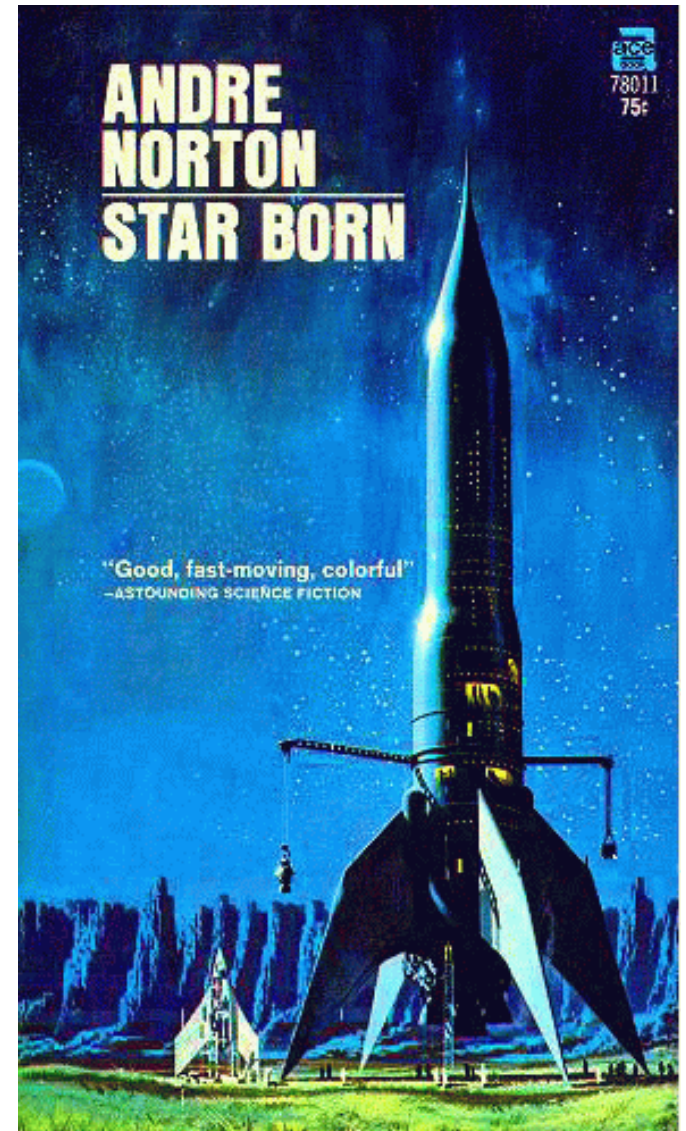
Cascades Library 2023 | Sterling, VA | Nov 14
Workshop: Tuesday, 7:00 PM

Agenda

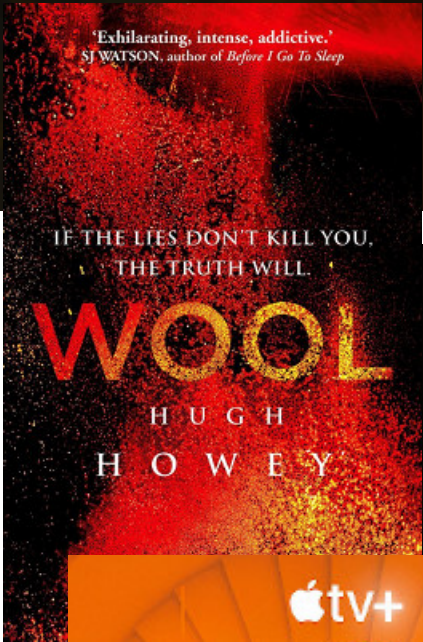
- Quick Author Introduction
 - Like, why on Earth would you listen to me?
- What the heck IS a Strong Hero?
 - Like, how do you even define this?
- Some Exercises...
 - To see if we can craft some Strong Heroes
- Some Final Thoughts on Heroes
 - Layering on top of what you've built in the exercises
- Utterly Shameless Plug
 - What can I say? At least I'm honest...

So, Who am I?

- 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...



A Few Milestones

- Started writing seriously: 2013
 - 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
- First full-price pro story sale: 2018



What Makes A Strong Hero?

There's no single recipe, but good characters tend to exhibit these attributes:

- Believable
 - Given the story conditions, the character makes sense
 - “No dragon tamers in a world without dragons”
- Relatable
 - You don't have to like them...
 - But you must emphasize with their struggle
 - Cersei's walk of shame in *Game of Thrones*
- Flawed but Sympathetic
 - Nobody likes a Mary Sue
 - Often, overcoming their flaws is what makes them sympathetic
 - “Vertigo” from director Alfred Hitchcock

And more...as we'll discover in the Exercises...

Let's Not Forget Context

Context represents the conditions of the story, e.g. – the Setting, the Theme, and the Story Problem

- Characters don't exist in isolation
- All characters “do something meaningful” in a story
- They are not casually interchangeable

Don't believe me? Try these...

- James Bond instead of Atticus Finch in “To Kill a Mockingbird”
- Rocky as Luke Skywalker in “Star Wars”

The Writing Rodeo

Bull Riding is scored:

- 50% for the Rider
- 50% for the Bull

It's a lot like that with
Characters & Context

Your job is to put them
through hell...





Let's Get Started!

Collaborative Exercises

But first, Dave's rules for Collaboration...

- Be courteous
- Be kind
- Be helpful to others
- Be truthful
- You don't have to share if you don't want to

0. The Basics

- What Genre?
 - Is it Fantasy, SF, Steampunk, a Genre Mash-Up?
- Is there a Theme?
 - Ex. – Underdog wins in the end through luck and pluck
- Do you have a tagline? (Optional, but useful)
 - A phrase or at most a few short sentences that sum up the story
 - Ex. – “Romeo and Juliet on the Titanic”

Example 0

- Genre?
 - Gritty fantasy in a world where mages rule
- Theme?
 - Underdog wins in the end through luck and pluck
 - Protagonist is an underdog who gets increasingly dangerous as she gets older
 - Planned to be a series of stories
- Tagline?
 - “She needed a hero, so she became one”

1. Protagonist

- Who is Your Protagonist?
 - Ex. – Frustrated youngster with mad flying skills who wants to join the Rebellion
- What's their Background?
 - Ex. – Orphaned, lives on farm with aunt & uncle
- What makes them special?
 - Why should we care about them?
 - Ex. – “The Force” is strong in this one

Example 1

- **Protagonist**
 - Pageeda: A young orphan girl living on the streets of a gritty port city
- **Background**
 - Came to the city as a refugee from a fallen kingdom with her mother and older sister
 - Just a baby when she arrived
 - Her mother later died in a plague
- **Why Special?**
 - Her deceased father was a great hero and warrior
 - His enemies would kill her if they knew about her

2. Starting Point

- What's normal?
 - Where's the Hero when the Adventure begins?
- What's the Hero's Life like?
 - We need to see it...
 - ...Because it's about to Change
- What's the Opening Setting?
 - How has it made the Hero who they are?

Example 2

- What's Normal?
 - Begging on the streets with her sister and friends
- What's Life Like?
 - Precarious but workable
 - It's good to have friends...there's safety in numbers
- Opening Setting?
 - The city's Fall Festival of Lights
 - Which is great until Thugs take her sister away

3. Goals

- What's the Hero's starting goal?
 - It can change over the course of the story...
 - Ex. – “Join the Rebellion” => “Save the Princess” => “Kill the Big Ship before it Kills us”
- Why does the Hero want that goal?”
 - What makes the goal worth striving for?
 - Ex. – “To End the Tyranny of the Empire”

Example 3

- **Starting Goal?**
 - Getting her sister back OR avenging her
- **Why Does the Hero Want the Goal?**
 - Her sister raised her after their mother died
 - She wants her family back

4. Starting Event

- What's the Starting Event?
 - The Event that changes the Hero's Path
 - Ex. – Finds out about a Princess to be rescued, then loses his aunt & uncle
- What emotions does the Event generate in the Hero?
 - Ex. – Grief at losing his family, rage at the Empire, makes him want to join the Rebellion even more

Example 4

- **Starting Event? (Inciting Incident)**
 - Her sister is kidnapped by Thugs
- **What Emotions does the Protagonist Feel?**
 - Guilt at getting away when her sister didn't
 - Thankfulness that her sister created an opportunity for her to escape
 - Sadness at losing her sister
 - Anger at the men who took her away
 - Determination to “get her back or avenge her”

5. Ending

- What's your Ending?
 - You don't have to have all the details yet
 - And you can still be a Plotter or a Pantser
 - But you should have some idea of where the Hero ends up
- How will the Hero's life change?
 - How has the Hero grown emotionally?
 - Ex. — Has saved the princess, become a great warrior & is on his way to mastering the Force

Example 5

- Ending?
 - Pageeda doesn't get her sister back
 - She does get a measure of revenge...
 - ...although there are still more villains to bring down
- How Will the Hero's Life Change?
 - She's chosen the Warrior's Path
 - She doesn't even know about her Father's Background, but she's already on the road to being a Leader
 - She's got a new animal companion
 - She's got burgeoning magical powers

6. Strengths

- What Strengths does the Hero have?
 - The Hero may know about his strengths
 - Or he might not... Ex. – Not knowing about the Force
- Is there a seemingly unimportant Strength?
 - Ex. – In “The Secret Life of Walter Mitty,” skateboarding turned out to be a life-saving skill

Example 6

- **Strengths?**
 - Sheer stubbornness and willingness to learn
 - Her magical empathy and power over animals
 - To be Explored: The legacy and influence of her family
- **How Will the Hero's Life Change?**
 - To Be Explored: The Legacy and Influence of her Family amongst the Refugees of their fallen Kingdom

7. Weaknesses

- What Weaknesses does the Hero Have
 - The Hero may know about his Weaknesses
 - Or he might not... Ex. – A Hero who implicitly trusts a Friend who's actually taking advantage of them
- Is there a seemingly unimportant Weakness?
 - Ex. – In “Vertigo,” the Hero has to overcome his fear of heights in order to prevail

Example 7

- **Weaknesses?**
 - She's young, small, poor, homeless, uneducated, and untrained in weapons
 - She's daring...but that could easily get her killed
 - Her enemy, ultimately, isn't a person, but a powerful and ruthless organization
- **Is there a seemingly unimportant Weakness?**
 - She doesn't know that much about the culture and customs of her Kingdom

8. Helpers

- Who Helps the Hero Succeed?
 - No Hero does everything...somebody always helps
 - Could be the “Scooby Gang”?
 - Allied interests, etc.
 - What are the Relationships that matter to them?
- Why would somebody help the Hero?
 - Ex. – An old hermit helps the Hero

Example 8

- Who Helps the Hero?
 - A strangely intelligent cat who's much like her (young, alone, small, uneducated, etc.)
 - A few guardsmen (though they're hampered)
 - A disabled war veteran turned street beggar
- Why would somebody help the Hero?
 - Because she inspires trust...and belief

9. Obstacles

- What Obstacles block the Hero's Path?
 - Opposing people (maybe even a bona fide Villain)
 - Ex. – Sabretooth always opposes Wolverine
 - Opposing forces
 - Ex. – Nazis vs. Indiana Jones
 - Natural obstacles
 - Ex. – Must get the jewels and escape from Pompeii before the volcano erupts
 - Self as an Obstacle
 - Hero must overcome <whatever> to prevail

Example 9

- Obstacles?
 - Poverty and non-citizen status
 - Justice is for Citizens...not unwanted Foreigners
 - Figuring out the clues to find out...
 - What happened to her sister?
 - Who did it?
 - The Bad Guys work for an organization too big to be easily brought to justice
 - Why are the Bad Guys doing what they're doing?

10. Complexity (& Homework)

- Real people are complex
 - Can “layer on” additional details
 - Ex. – The protagonist has trouble taking responsibility for their actions...overcoming this can become part of their Journey
 - Can add a “ghost” effect
 - Something in their past that still tortures or influences them
 - Nuances: What’s their worldview?
 - Worldview, demographics, beliefs, false beliefs, life experiences
 - Can model a character after a real person, but change things
 - Ex. – A bad temper gets emphasized into a larger flaw
 - Historical figures are great for this

Example 10

Welcome to the Mean Streets of Cosaturi

Life is hard for Pageeda, a young homeless refugee girl growing up on the streets of the gritty port city of Cosaturi. Lucky for her, she's always been protected by her older sister Illyria.

Now it's autumn, Pageeda's favorite time of year, when Cosaturi gets lit up like a fantasy wonderland for autumn's Festival of Lights. Free food is plentiful and people are generous—even to street beggars like them.

But when Illyria is kidnapped in a vicious back-alley ambush, Pageeda vows to get her sister back—whatever it takes.

Pageeda may be young, but she's not too young to learn how to kill.

The bitter days of autumn are here...



What? You're Still Here?

Well, there's still more stuff to do...

- You've got the Ingredients
 - You've got a Hero plus associated Story Elements
- You can “see” your Hero's Journey...
 - You've got the basic Shape of your Story
- You've got everything you need...
 - So, Go Write your Story!

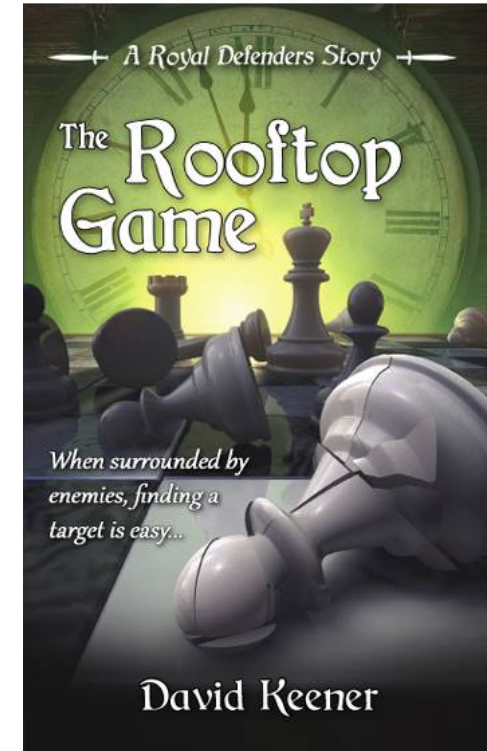
Shameless Plug



A futuristic heist
behind enemy
lines



What happens when
a retired Marine
accidentally buys a
Magic Road?



“Die Hard” on the
roof of a castle
tower...

Shameless Anthology Plug!



Heroes defending
the innocent from
magical threats



Detectives solving
crimes in fantasy
settings

Questions

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Credits



Artwork licensed from Glenn Porter, with some additional Photoshop changes.



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*. Next to it, an image for *Silo*, the Apple+ TV show based on the book.



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.



Bull Rider, licensed from Deposit Photos.



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.