

# Worldbuilding Basics

A Workshop by David Keener

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**Workshop Day | Ashburn, VA | November 2, 2025**

**Workshop: Sunday, 1:00 – 4:00 PM**





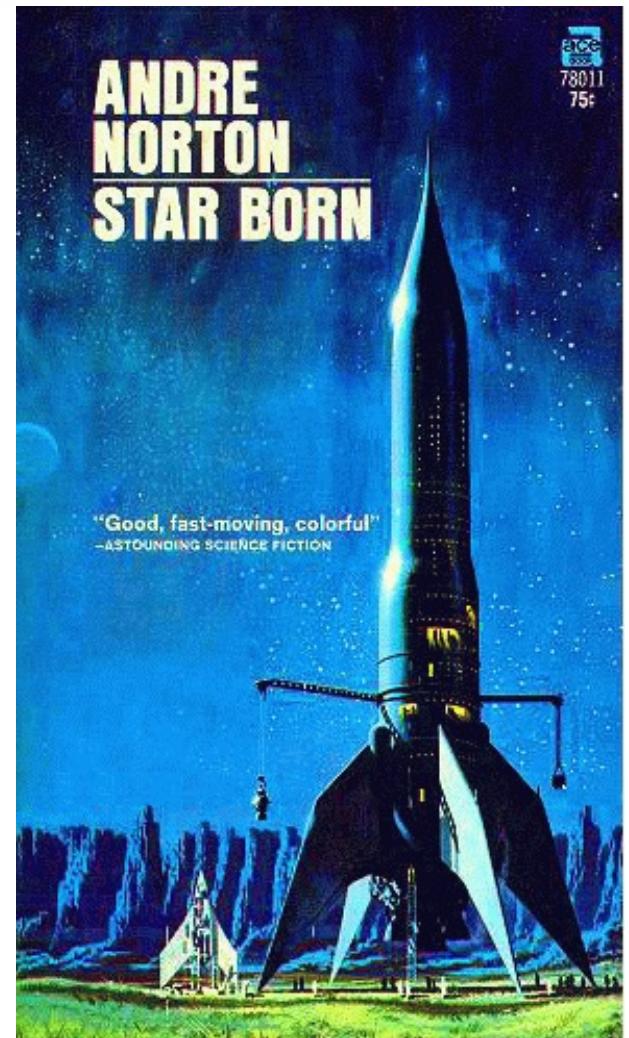
# Agenda

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- Introduction
- Settings: High-Level
  - Steps 1 - 3
- Settings: Low-Level
  - Steps 4 - 6
- Wrap-Up (and totally shameless plug)

# About Me

- Knew I wanted to be a writer when I was 10
- This the book that made me want to be a writer...
- Published first story in 2015
- Published first book in 2017
- Published first anthology in 2018



# What Makes a Good Setting?

- Sufficiently complex to seem plausible
- Well-defined prerequisites
- Logical, consistent flow from those prereqs
- Setting promotes the possibility of CONFLICT
- For a series, the Setting should provide multiple avenues for CONFLICT to occur
- It feels real

# What Not To Do

- Design a Setting that serves only one purpose
  - “The Terminator” syndrome
- Add a major SF/Fantasy element without considering the impact on society
  - We have the Transporter...now what?
- Create a Setting that’s too neat and orderly
  - Reality is messy
- Ignore basic infrastructure details
  - How do that many monsters live in a cave?

# The Reactive Net

The Goals are:

- To create a coherent, consistent and connected background
- That can support multiple story lines over time
- Leveraging the same Setting, Characters and a diverse cast of Supporting Characters.

# The Reactive Net (2)

Provides a **6-Step Process** for crafting your Setting with...

- Enough potential Conflict to support a series
- Enough implied Complexity to feel realistic
- Enough Connectivity to “suggest” useful story interactions
- Enough Flexibility to adapt to inciting events and character actions

# Step 1: Define the Playing Field

- The “Playing Field” the home territory where most action occurs
- TASK: Write a thumbnail ketch of your Setting
  - 100 words or 5 bullet points

For Batman, it's Gotham City. Harry Potter has Hogwarts. Sherlock Holmes has London.

# **SOUTHERN FRIED FEY 1+ KOSMOPOLIS**

- Small but growing city in Tennessee
- Noteworthy bio-tech corporate presence
  - Home of MOEX Technologies (bio-tech)
  - Home of Dartfell University (bio-tech, computers)
- Agricultural & rural areas around the city
- Large and liberal artistic community
- Surrounded by rolling hills, forests & parks

# Step 2: Define Any Special Rules

- TASK: Define any special rules that are in play...
  - Does Magic work?
  - FTL?
  - Aliens?
  - Elvis?
  - Is there a Hell-Mouth nearby?
  - Zombies?

# **SOUTHERN FRIED FEY 2: SPECIAL RULES**

- Werewolves and vampires – out of the closet
  - Speculation about other supernatural critters
- Magic works, but is rare
- BUT Magic seems to be increasing slowly...
  - “Seeping back into the world”
- Major ley line nexus nearby
  - Artistic community centered around nexus
  - An influential Fey community exists nearby
    - In an area called the “Brambles”

# Step 3: Define Fractions

To provide the potential for multiple angles of conflict, you need factions, i.e. – groups or orgs with differing goals

- TASK: Define three groups within your Setting
  - Provide a 1 - 2 line description of their goals

# **SOUTHERN FRIED FEY 3: FACTIONS**

- **City Government** (notoriously corrupt)
- **Police** – Thin blue line protecting the public
- **FBI** – Investigating corruption, Fey threats, etc.
- **Dartfell University** – Gov. grants; bio-tech grants
- **MOEX Technologies** – Too much money/power
- **Werewolf Pack** – Buffer between Fey / Humans
- **Kalifey** – Fey community in “Brambles”
- **Church of Christ Triumphant** – Hates “subhumans”

# Reality Isn't Predictable

- Everybody pulls in different directions
- Nobody ever gets everything they want
- Reality is what happens when all these things get worked out in the Stew Pot of History

You want your Setting to imply enough complexity to feel real

# Step 4: Detail Each Factor

Iterate over your factors, defining each one in more detail

- **TASK:** Define a factor in more detail. Provide a sentence or two for each category below:
  - Attitudes
  - Goals
  - Strengths
  - Weaknesses

# SOUTHERN FRIED FEY 4: CHURCH OF C.T. \*

- **Attitudes:** Everything supernatural is part of a nefarious plot by Satan. All supernatural creatures and those who dabble in the black arts (Magic) should die violently. Supernatural creatures, including mages, are not really people.
- **Goals:** To expunge the supernatural from the world.
- **Strengths:** They're relentless, smart and wealthy. They're also good at public relations.
- **Weaknesses:** They are relentless. Sometimes they don't recognize when to cut their losses. They're fanatical. Compromise isn't a word in their vocabulary.

\* Church of Christ Triumphant – (CCT) A radical, militant, semi-fascist organization.

# Step 5: Define Faction Operations

How do the factions perform their day-to-day operations? Where do they get the money they need to run? How do they recruit new members? Who's doin' deals with who?

- TASK: Detail at least three operational activities...
  - Can focus on one faction...or...more

# **SOUTHERN FRIED FEY 5: OPERATIONS**

- **Werewolf Pack** has a group house owned by the pack leader where they all meet. They live separately and tithe 10% of their income.
- **CCT** runs a syndicated “Anti-Monster” radio show and accepts donations to campaign against the supernatural realm.
- **MOEX Technologies** pioneered the blood substitute, AAA-Plus™, that vampires use so they’re not dependent on human blood.

# Step 6: Define Key Roles

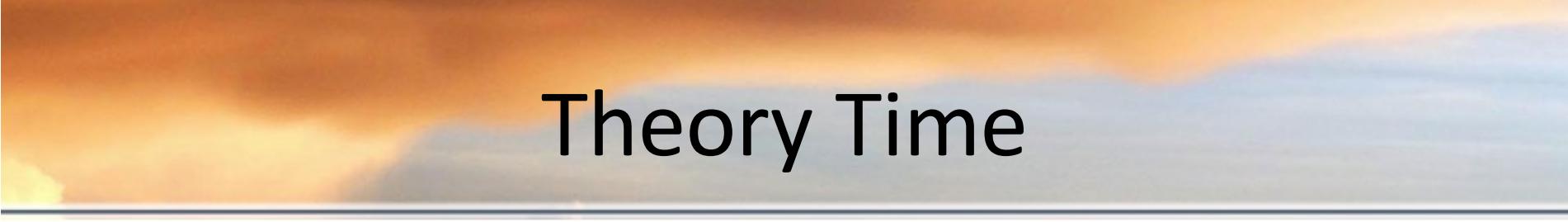
- TASK: Define some key roles within the Setting, i.e. – roles that are likely to appear in your stories.
  - At least four roles
  - Can be in different factions
  - Or even not associated directly with a faction
  - Ex. – the local fence for stolen goods

# **SOUTHERN FRIED FEY 6: KEY ROLES**

- The **“fixer”** from the Werewolf Pack
- The **ambitious reporter** looking for a story
- The **drug dealer** selling a new recreational drug that affects supernatural creatures
- The **local fence** for stolen goods
- The **vet** at the local zoo
- The **FBI agent** investigating Fey threats

# “Just In Time” Design

- Your Setting design is done in broad strokes
- You design your factions and roles
- You don't have to figure out every detail now
- You fill in more details as you go
  - Keeping a **Series Bible** can be useful
- Don't get hung up on world-building...



# Theory Time

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- You've designed your Setting
- You've added key roles
- You've added operational details

Now let's put this Setting to the test...

# **SOUTHERN FRIED FEY, BOOK 1**

PROMPT: Someone was savagely mauled by an animal

- The **Werewolf Pack**'s fixer is worried about a rogue lycanthrope
- The **Police** want to know what's going on
- Your **Hero** wants to prevent anybody else from getting hurt
- Your **Hero** talks to the **Vet** at the local zoo, who was originally brought in by the police to look at the body
- Your **Hero** encounters the fixer from the Werewolf Pack
- The **CCT** uses the incident as part of an anti-monster campaign
- Your local **Reporter** smells a story, too
- Finally, the **Kalifey** (the local Fey community) are annoyed because the body was left near the Brambles — was it a warning or a threat aimed at them?

# **SOUTHERN FRIED FEY, BOOK 2**

PROMPT: A half-blood Fey dies of an overdose of a new street drug that affects supernatural creatures

- The **Kalifey** want to know where the drug came from
- The Kalifey ask your **Hero** to help them
- The **Police** want to find whoever's distributing bad drugs
- The **Werewolf Pack** is involved again because the drug affects werewolves, too.
- **Dartfell University** is involved because the drug was a byproduct of one of their experiments, and it's been hijacked by an insider for illicit purposes
- The **CCT** thinks this is a great way to kill monsters

# Events and Reactions

- The essence of the Reactive Net is that when an event occurs, people and organizations react, generating various types of conflict.
- Not only do they react, but they do so in logical, consistent ways.
- Reactions also occur when your Hero takes action as well.
- Leverage these reactions for your stories...

# Questions

<http://www.davidkeener.org>

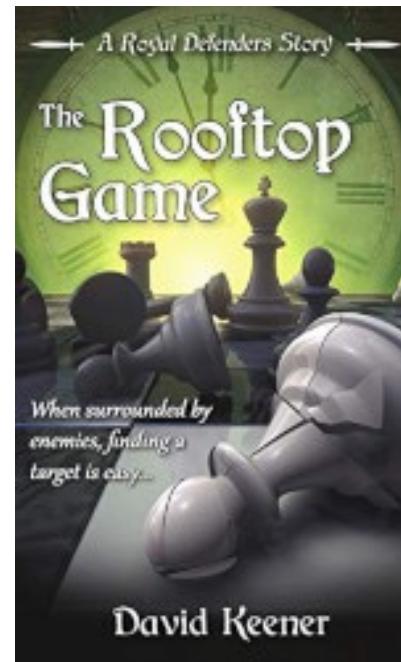


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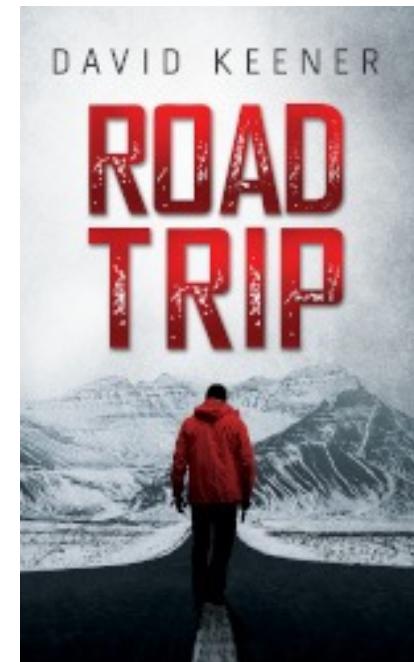
# Shameless Plug for My Books



Futuristic Heist  
Behind Enemy  
Lines



“Die Hard” on  
the roof of a  
Castle Tower

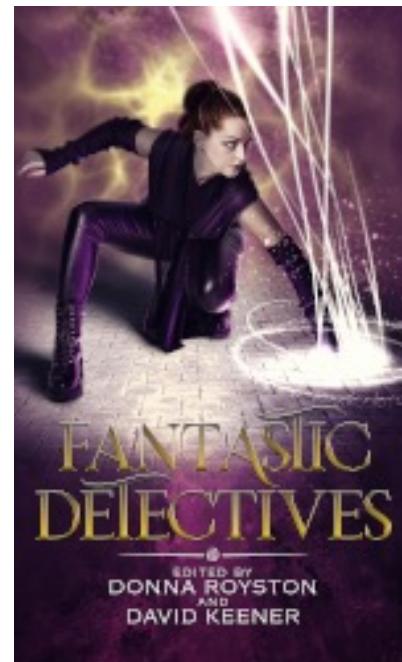


His first Mistake...  
Buying a Magic  
Road

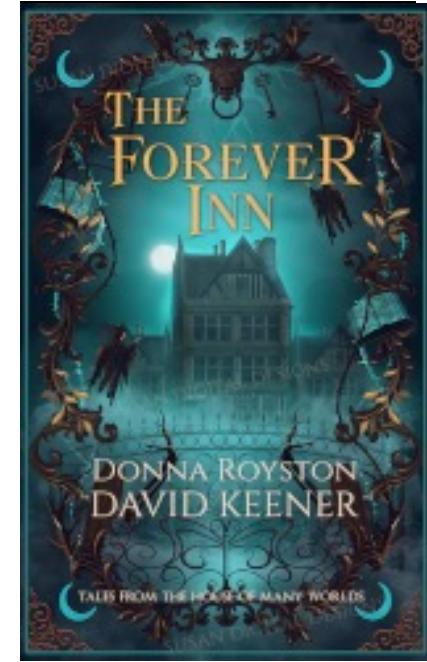
# Shameless Plug for My Anthologies



Stories of Fantasy  
Heroes



Stories of Fantasy  
Crime Solvers



A Metaverse-  
Travelling Tavern  
And Shared  
Setting  
(Coming Soon)

# Credits



Kenari, homeworld of Cassian Andor in the Andor series. Impoverished children living in a tribal society in a jungle, while off-world interests spend uncounted amounts of money stripmining. This is Andor's first glimpse of this other world. Copyright by 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, used under fair use.



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.



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.