

Series vs. Stand-Alone

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Writing for Children and YA Literature Festival, NSW Writers' Centre 2006

Quote from Rebecca Forster:

"Writing a series is like when a dinner guest becomes a roommate. Writing the first book is like having a dinner party with exciting and stimulating guests, carefully planned menu, atmosphere – but the guests get to go home. And you get to put your feet up and relax. Writing a series, the guests stay permanently. You have to think of exciting things for them to do, vary the menu, invite different guests for them to play with."

I'm here today to look at writing a children's book series which to a certain extent will involve comparisons with a stand-alone novel. Before we begin I'll give a brief overview of my experience of writing both. I have written six books in the 'So' series for HarperCollins Publishers Australia: *So Gross!*, *So Feral!*, *So Sick!*, *So Festy!*, *So Grotty!* and *So Stinky!* These are a collection of 32 unlinked short stories with a gross, humorous bent. It is the genre which is repeated in this series. I've also started to write an adventure mystery series with the luxury of characters and setting staying the same. Book One, *Unleashed!* will be launched later today. Book Two is written and has been accepted and Book Three has been contracted. These are also with HarperCollins Publishers. As well as series I've published a tween stand-alone novel, *Team Dream*. Let's look at some definitions:

Stand-alone means capable of operating independently; having every necessary or normal part or component or step.

Serialised series - You need to read the books in order for them to really make sense at all. Multiple books but one story. *Lord of the Rings* is the archetype. Tolkien viewed it as one story. *Harry Potter* is the current king as is Lemony Sickett's *Series of Unfortunate Events*. The scope is important here. Fantasy novels have that scope. Historical novels can have that scope, also.

Formula series - presents a new story that follows a structure we grow to recognize and expect. Character-led mysteries such as the

Freewheelers are a great example of formula series. If you read them all in order you'll probably get more from the series but it isn't crucial. Readers aren't trying to find out what happens next in a long running story but rather they want another great mystery. It's a genre dominated form. The key is that the stories and plots are unique and compelling and non-formulaic from book to book.

Linked series. These are mostly stand-alone novels that have some sort of tenuous connection or link, more by design and format than by content. Examples would be the My Diary series published by Scholastic and the Aussie Bites/Nibbles/Chomps series published by Penguin.

Publishing, in some ways, is very much about managing risk. Publishers want most of the risk to be on the author's part and authors want the risk to be on the publisher's part. A publisher signing a five book series pushes the risk to the publisher's side, so that many might balk.

Why would you write a series?

1) If you have a story that can't be contained by one book. It takes considerable ego to write a series of novels. You can't be in a hurry to reach the big finale, so you enjoy putting it off. A story line that stretches into multiple novels requires extreme passion, commitment, and yes, even obsession.

2) If you've found a character or characters you love that you'd like to put in a variety of situations. You can get a deeper, more richer exploration of that character.

3) Readers like to know they're going to reliably like a book. Publishers 'brand' authors to flag this for the reader. A brand makes a promise to a reader of what will be delivered in a book. In children's fiction brands are people like Andy Griffiths, Emily Rodda (Jennifer Rowe), Paul Jennings, Deb Abela, Morris Gleitzman, J.A. Mawter, Felicity Pullman to

name a few. If you write enough books you'll build a brand. Certain imprints (like HarperCollin's Voyager imprint for fantasy) or a character name (like Harry Potter) can also brand a book and offer reliability to readers, as does a series which almost guarantees a certain reader experience, as well as hook the reader to wanting to find out more.

4) Series can generate huge sales and reader interest. What Harry Potter has over stand-alone books is that reader's are drawn into not only the new release, but also to the backlist, boosting sales that may have previously been plateauing. In a way then, the books are self-sustaining with each release plus reader expectations creating demand for earlier titles. This can occur in stand-alone books like the *Da Vinci Code* but it is more rare.

5) Obviously with a series the writer hopes to build up a readership - fans who will automatically buy the next volume in the series, thus ensuring steady and increasing sales as more and more readers become hooked. I suppose the biggest plus to writing a series is the reader response, for they truly come to love these characters as much as the author does and they don't mind telling you.

Let's look at crime fiction for a moment. Most crime series feature a detective of one sort or another and this element adds an extra strand to the novel. Not only is there a mystery to solve but we become involved in the personal and private life of the protagonist that develops as the series progresses. The stand alone crime novel is different. They may feature a detective but when the book ends so does their career. These novels tend to focus on the psychological aspects of crime rather than the whodunit or whydunit. They give the writer greater freedom to do with his characters as they wish, killing them off even, for they will not be required again once the book is finished.

6) Writing a series can be a wonderful apprenticeship for a writer. For the 'So' series it was easy to write one gross funny story. It was easy to write 2 or even 5 stories. But to write gross funny stories *over and over and over* again forced me to explore and expand my skills as a writer. In order to write 32 gross funny stories I had to experiment with voice,

point of view, tense, focalisation, characters, situations, settings, plot ideas etc etc. I wrote every sort of genre, romance comedy, historical comedy, adventure comedy, fantasy comedy, crime comedy etc etc. I spent a lot of time researching humour. The stories had a predictable framework of gross+humour but the stories themselves could not be predictable. Each story had to be unique. Writing the second series, The Freewheelers, means I'm still an apprentice. This time I have the luxury of carry-over characters and setting but I now have the challenge of character development, exploring the mystery genre more etc. I feel incredibly blessed to be a 9th year apprentice.

Warnings about writing a series:

1. It's fine to plot or plan where your series might go but the second book will only see the light of day when the first book proves itself in the market. The first novel in a series needs to be able to stand on its own. It needs to be able to read and enjoyed on its own merits without needing to read anything else although it must be pointed out that reading the whole series will have a richness to it that is missing from reading one book on its own. In fact, each book in a series should be able to stand on its own. You do have to provide the most important plot points of previous books, but in as short and non-intrusive a method as you can devise.

“Basically, if I've bought a book, I've bought it for a story - not a little piece of one that I have to wait another year to continue.”

2. Second Book Syndrome. It's almost impossible to replicate the feelings for the reader whilst reading Book One and thus sequels are often disappointing. It's also impossible to replicate your feelings as a writer. Whilst the first book is written with the passion and drive and personal enthusiasm for the characters and their story, the second book is market driven and as such the pressure is on for the writer to perform, to increase sales, hook more readers etc etc.

3. An author writing a series can feel like they're in a rut. Authors like to challenge themselves, to extend themselves and acquire new writing skills and knowledge. A series can stultify this so that authors can get stale, really fast.

4. A series requires sophisticated patterns of organisation moreso than a stand-alone novel.

5. The more successful the series, the greater the expectation for the writer to perform. I've often felt for J.K. Rowling and the monster she created.

6. Series often face a problem of diminishing returns. Shona Martyn at HarperCollins told me Book One always sells the most. Yes, there are certainly examples of series that explode to heights of popularity in the middle, but many go out strong and then fight a battle of attrition over the remaining titles. If you keep 75% of your audience for Book 2 and another 75% of that audience for book 3 you've gone from 15,000 sales to 11,500 sales to 8437 sales. What the bookseller will see, is an author who can't crack the magic 10,000 barrier and they may well lose interest in stocking future books. It seems that readers are reluctant to embrace a story mid-series.

7. Retail concerns. Shelf space costs the bookseller money. A series takes up a lot of shelf space. It also means shelf space is given to the early books in the series which may be 2 or 3 years old. This bumps out opportunities for newer, especially stand-alone, books.

8. From a publisher's standpoint, there's no guarantee that book 2 or 3 will be of the same quality to the first title. Often the first book is lovingly crafted over a long period of time, whereas the second book is churned out in a matter of months. It's not unusual to hear from authors that the first book took ten years to write. No publisher is going to wait ten years for the next one. In my experience of children's series, publishers seem to want 1 – 2 books per year which can put a huge amount of pressure on an author.

9. Sometimes, successful series fade away, despite their popularity. Publishers aren't interested in pursuing 'good' sales of books 4, 5 or 6; they want 'great' sales, which often can only come with a brand new series.

10. Series seem to be judged more harshly by both reviewers and readers. One-book authors can always start fresh, no matter what they write. A series author not only has to present solid novels, they must measure up to past books, generate future instalments, and give the reader a great reason to keep following the series. One major literary journal in Australia has made the decision not to review series in children's literature. I'm not sure why this is. Perhaps there is an assumption that series book are easier to write or of a lower literary standard? This has a huge impact on an author when their work is not made accessible to the reading public via reviews. From my observation, how they define series is particularly 'elastic'.

11. Even after you've proven yourself, there are no guarantees. Some people think a successful series writer can sell anything they write to a publisher. This is not so.

12. Empty Nest Syndrome. Authors can spend many years in the company of their characters so that even though you know that one day the series will come to an end, it can be very hard to say good-bye. But then, there's the next series ...

Words of Advice for New Authors

1) Focus on making Book One the best it can possibly be. By all means 'pitch' the idea of subsequent books but *expect* a publisher to be wary. The more professionally you present Book One, the more likely a publisher will buy into the idea of Books Two, Three etc. Experienced authors can get away with submitting three chapters and a synopsis for Book One and subsequent books. New authors sometimes also pitch sample chapters but more often they submit a finished product. This certainly takes the pressure off - if the publisher wants a second book

Book One is already written. Some authors recommend writing two books in the series before submitting although personally, I wouldn't.

2) A trilogy is possibly more saleable than a ten book series. Having said that, Lemony Snicket's *A Series of Unfortunate Events* reached thirteen books and has sold approximately 50 million copies world-wide. And Geoffrey McSkimming's *Cairo Jim* series has over 20 titles.

3) Be as flexible as possible. If the publisher will only take the book as a stand alone, consider that it may be best as a stand alone. If the publisher wants a multiple book deal my motto has always been 'Say 'Yes', first. Panic later.'

4) In certain genres, linked/formulaic series make sense. Historical romance and mystery work well as a series, as does humour or comedy. Indeed, fantasy is bound by the convention of the genre. The 'So' series is an example of this:

(gross + humour) X 32 stories = 6 bestselling books

5) Write *your* book. Don't try to second-guess the market. Once you have an excellent story, the market will take care of the rest. Remember that readers will embrace characters they care about.

6) See if you can sum up the central plot or concept of the series in one sentence. For example:

The 'So' series is an anthology of gross, funny unconnected short stories for the 8 – 12 year age range.

The Freewheelers series is about a group of stunt-bike riding friends living in the inner city who love adventure and solving mysteries.

7) A large cast of subsidiary characters is useful, if you like them enough to bring them back a few books later and thereby expand relationships begun earlier. This allows the author to provide an answer for 'whatever happened to...?' Know your characters intimately. Even the insignificant inconsequential ones can be fodder for a later book. Layer

the community carefully – each resident of your fictional society can contribute to later stories.

8) Work to sustain the primary relationships without letting them become monotonous and losing any immediacy.

9) Plan out the series to have at least a rough outline of how the first book will fit into the second and how the third book in the series will spin off the first two. Address potential problems and opportunities in the planning stages of Book One. If you don't get it right in the first book then you live with it forever.

10) Be amenable to working closely with your editor and publisher. Writing a series is very challenging for all parties concerned. The writer must be in tune with what the publisher and editor will want and the editor must be in tune with what they can expect from the writer in all stages of the work in progress. The writer will need to gain experience from each stage to successfully take the book from one book in the series to the next and be able to blend them all together while keeping a reader's attention guaranteeing future sales for the work in progress.

11) Pick up a couple of series to see how the authors of different series was able to take the reader from one book and story to the other while not losing a reader who missed an earlier book in the series.