

Writing a South African Science Fiction/Fantasy Story  
(with many points for general writing as well)  
by  
Arthur Goldstuck

In writing a science fiction story with a South African theme, the most important thing to bear in mind is that it must not look like a cut-and-paste location job. In other words, if you could simply substitute American or Uzbeki or the Falklands Islands for the South African location, it just won't wash. The story must be intrinsically South African, with the human or physical environment having a direct influence on the plot, characters or outcome of the story.

South African dialect helps to situate the story and identify the characters as belonging to the location, but in itself is also not good enough. If that dialect could easily be replaced with something out of Harlem or Haifa, without the story losing any meaning, then it is the dialogue equivalent of cut-and-paste.

Beware of well-worn themes, unless you can retell them in novel ways:

- The Aids crisis, the Vredefort Dome, and the Cradle of Mankind have been done repeatedly, but seldom done well. Do it well, and you can get away with it. Do it badly, and it is very bad.
- Stereotyped stupid farmers make for stupid stories, as do stereotyped wise old farmers. If you want to do stereotypes, there is a career waiting for you in animated cartoon shorts.
- Selling one's soul to the devil or (insert name of favourite belief system here) equivalent is a theme as old as literature itself, both in and out of South Africa.
- Animals that can talk are the stuff of fable, not of science fantasy, unless you have a fresh and unusual justification.
- Avoid dressing African tradition up as science fiction and fantasy. For example, the supposed magic of the sangoma is itself not the stuff of fantasy, but the impact of it on a fantasy plot could be highly relevant. The existence of tokoloshes belong to the realm of the supernatural rather than of fantasy, as do other traditional beliefs like the role of ancestors. In short, a traditional belief system does not represent science fiction and fantasy in itself.
- The rediscovered diary or unearthed journal of a South African survivor of a future cataclysm. An alien visitor to a desolate planet finding the last will and testament of a South African survivor of a future cataclysm. And so on and on and on ...

Having said all that, the demands on good SA SF are the same as on good SF in general: a good story, a clear plot structure, well developed characters, and dialogue that doesn't make your reader cringe.

The thoughts and words of a character must be in tune with who and what the character is. A South African who is clearly of Dutch decent would be unconvincing using phrasings associated with Britons or Americans, for example. It applies to culture, socio-economic status and educational background as well. It's not that you have to be class-conscious as a writer, but that you have to be

appropriateness-conscious.

The setting in terms of time must be appropriate to the technology on display. Don't set a story five years in the future with technologies that are dramatically more advanced than ours. Even 50 years in the future we won't have manned interstellar travel (barring some cosmic miracle, which in a plot structure had better be convincing!) or anti-gravity boots. Similarly, in a story set outside of time and place, make sure that passing references to events and objects linked to a specific time do not undermine the setting or ambience.

The story should have a reasonable climax, twist, or at least a denouement - a plot outcome, solution or explanation that gives the story a reason for its existence. Simply recounting a history (a favourite approach to story-telling in many writers' first efforts) makes for boring reading, as does mere plot progression without purpose.

The plot should not be glib; you cannot simply gloss over complex events in a "then this happened, then that happened" style.

Don't rush through the story. Once you have the initial version down on paper, work through it to see where dialogue can be added, improved or removed. Make sure the plot and style are consistent. Do your characters have character? Work on the characterisation, and many a story is rescued simply by adding ambience, i.e. elements of atmosphere, mood and attitude.

Finally, remember that truth really is stranger than fiction. The kind of hugely unexpected things that tend to catch the planet off guard in the real world, like the tsunami that killed tens of thousands in Asia, the sudden emergence of the Internet as a global electronic communications medium, and the supreme callousness of the likes of Al Qaeda, are most unconvincing as fiction. The reason most disaster movies do not survive the test of time is precisely because they go for maximum impact with minimum plot development. The reason science fiction often translates so badly onto the big screen is because the core ingredients of great SF, like wonderful characters and immersive ambience, are usually lost in the 90 minutes of screen time allotted to them. What's left is the stripped down plot, the hi-tech dazzle, and the fireworks at the end: a combination which is often not enough to satisfy the viewer, since it is simply not convincing story-telling. In writing, this applies equally, since you are trying to convince readers to experience the story in their minds. Don't expect them to visualise something that is unconvincing. But if you do, try to do it in a way that incorporates the guidelines above.

You can ignore all of these rules if you've won the Nobel Prize for Literature, or make a fabulous living from writing unintelligibly or unintelligently. We won't argue with success. But until then, the rules matter to the judges.