

# World Building Around the Fatal Flaw

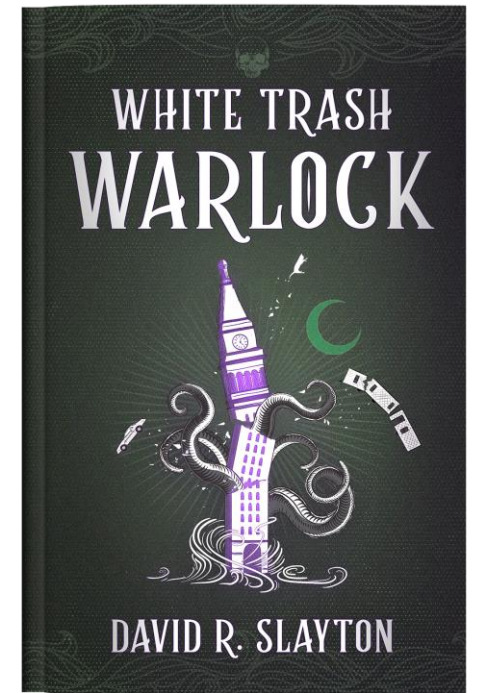
David R. Slayton



# Who Am I?

- I'm David R. Slayton.
- I have a Bachelor's in History, focusing on Ancient Civilizations, their decline, collapse, and transformation.
- I study fantasy worlds, since that's what I write, and I'm always looking for ways to make my worlds more believable and more enticing to readers.
- My debut urban fantasy, **WHITE TRASH WARLOCK**, was released in October 2020 from Blackstone Publishing. It's available in paperback, ebook, and audio.
- Book II, **TRAILER PARK TRICKSTER** is out in October 2021.
- You can find me anywhere on social media if you'd like to connect.\*

*\*Just don't forget the R in David R. Slayton if you google me.*





# Why This Workshop?

- Speculative fiction writers often overwrite, submitting novels with bloated wordcounts that make it difficult to attract an agent or traditional publisher.
- Even if you intend to self-publish, a tighter read usually makes for a happier reader and a happier reader will buy more books.
- Often a lot of these extra words are devoted to world-building, and could be trimmed if the author narrowed their focus to what drives the conflict in the world.
- The point of this workshop is to help you think about how you could narrow your worldbuilding to center a crucial flaw or conflict that informs the story's tension.

# What Is a Fatal Flaw?

- The fatal flaw is an incurable problem, the thing that drives issues and conflict in your world.
- It's the imperfection that makes your world believable.



# What Is a Fatal Flaw?

- The flaw might be resolved in the series' conclusion, but it's doubtful.
- The flaw is usually a condition of the world, a driving force behind global or higher conflict.



# What Is a Fatal Flaw?

You can probably name some flaws in our own world that make good contenders:

- War
- Racism
- Income Inequality
- Religious Persecution
- Resource Scarcity

Any of these might make a good foundation for a world-level conflict as a backdrop to your story.



# So Why Do you Want One?

- **Verisimilitude**, which is the quality of being verisimilar.
- Here's a screenshot from Merriam Webster (M-W.com):

**verisimilar** adjective

 Save Word

veri·sim·i·lar | \ ,ver-ə-'si-mə-lər  , -'sim-lər \

## Definition of *verisimilar*

- 1 : having the appearance of truth : [PROBABLE](#)
- 2 : depicting realism (as in art or literature)





# Why Do you Want One?

- Having an incurable central issue at the heart of your world deepens its reality and increases reader engagement.
- Otherwise, to make your books *seem* more realistic so people believe they could happen.
- That belief will sustain their interest.
- Do you remember the Matrix? There was an older matrix that was a utopia and it crashed because it was too perfect, a paradise. (The second matrix also failed because it was too terrifying).
- Your world needs a lot of things to make it feel real to the reader.
- No matter how magical or fantastic, there has to be conflict, fear of death, etc. – something *wrong* with it.
- For example, even the richest person in the world still fears death and can't escape it.
- The Fatal Flaw is the thing no one can fix.





# Why Have One?

- To make your fictional worlds feel more real and hook the reader's sense of verisimilitude.



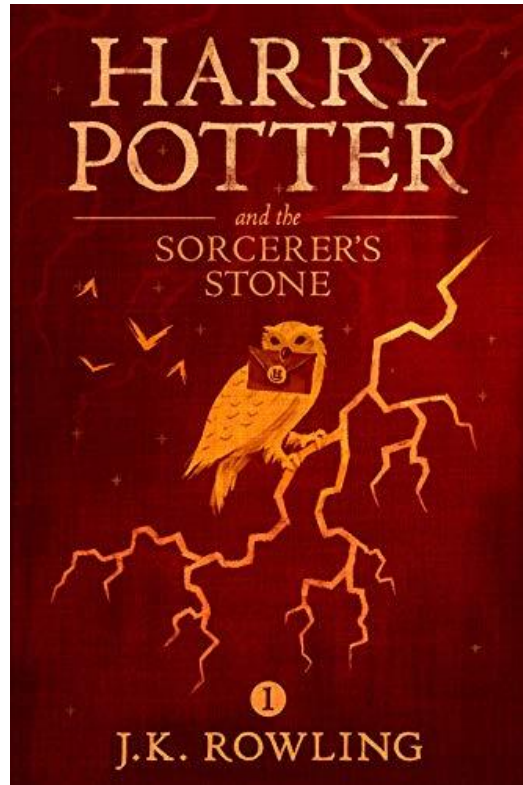


# How to Pick One?

- The best way to learn to write fiction that works, is to study fiction that works.
- And with a library card, it's basically free.\*
- Actively read books in the genre you want to write.
- Outline them, especially plot and word count, chapter by chapter.
- Do this for three novels in your chosen genre and you'll learn so much about how to write a book.

*\*Though if you can afford to buy a used copy to cut apart it can help.*

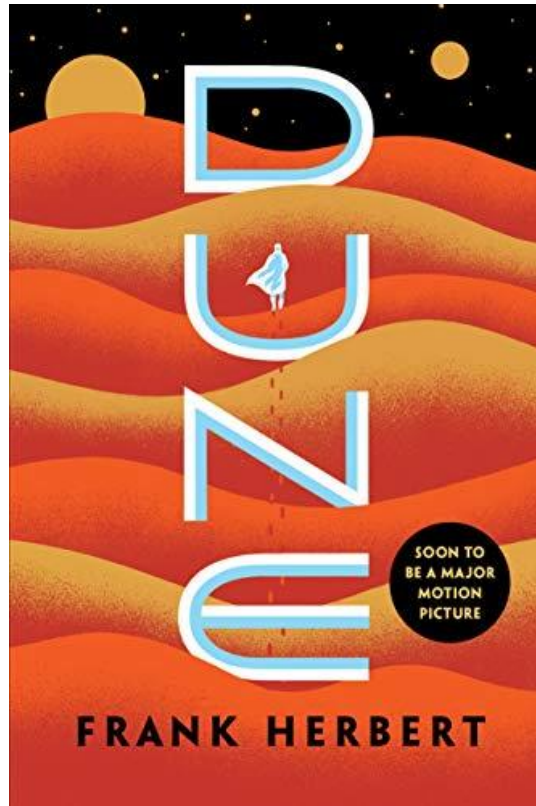
# Examples – Harry Potter by J.K. Rowling



- If I asked you to define the fatal flaw in Harry Potter you might say Voldemort – but he's just the villain, the big bad.
- In Harry Potter the fatal flaw is racism (though you could argue for class differences. I'd say the class issues arise from racism).
- Whether or not Voldemort is defeated, the racism that empowered him as a threat will still exist.



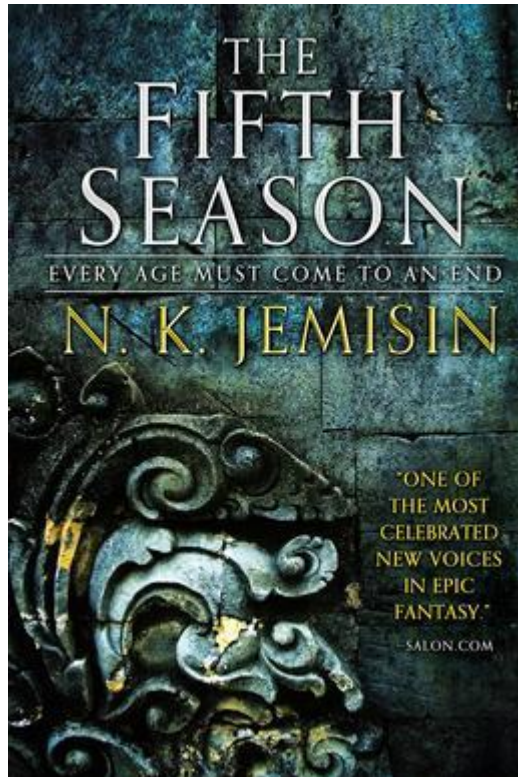
# Examples – Dune by Frank Herbert



- In Dune the fatal flaw is obvious: it's resource scarcity.
- That takes the form of water on Arrakis, which is exceedingly rare and in the form of the Spice, which is rare across the galaxy.
- The conflict of the novel is about controlling the Spice, but even by the end, the scarcity of the Spice is not resolved.



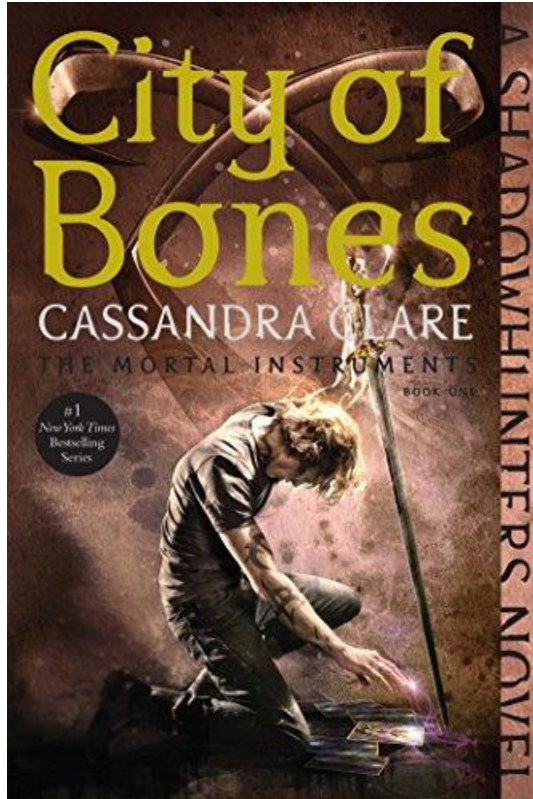
# Examples – N.K. Jemisin's Broken Earth Series



- N.K. Jemisin's FIFTH SEASON starts with a world breaking moment, leading to climate change and massive change.
- The fatal flaw, the change, is exacerbated or mitigated by individual actions, but the season would have come regardless.
- In this case the flaw is inevitable.



# Examples – Cassandra Clare's MORTAL INSTRUMENTS



- In the Mortal Instruments, and all of the Shadowhunters books, class tension drives much of the background conflict.
- That tension is between who has magic or angelic blood and who does not.
- Like Harry Potter, this often takes the form of racism, but I'd argue that the class issue is more fundamental in this series.





# Feel Free to Be Original

- While I recommend studying other books, I also recommend trying to grow beyond the past.
- This especially comes up in world building when it's trying unnecessarily to be "historically accurate."
- Feel free to leave beyond racism, homophobia, sexism, rape, etc. – Give your characters more unique problems.
- "But David, I need to have those problems because they're historically accurate."
- Unless you're writing historical fiction, no, no you don't.
- Also, many of our ideas of what is historically accurate are wrong because they're based on other fiction writers.
- I can't tell you how many fantasy writers tell me they have to include gratuitous rape scenes because of Game of Thrones. Well guess what, we didn't have dragons or magic so it's okay if your fiction isn't historically accurate.
- Part of why we read speculative fiction is to escape, so while I'm encouraging you to include a fatal flaw I'm also challenging you to create worlds where your readers don't have to face all of the same crap they do in the real one.
- Try to strike a balance.





# How the Flaw Affects Characters



- In each of the examples I just gave you, characters are affected by or react to the flaw.
- Each character has a response to the flaw, even if they aren't conscious of it.
- For example, Herimone lives with the slur of being called mud blood.
- Draco enjoys using that slur and judges others it applies to.
- Harry, being pureblood, doesn't have to think about the flaw (racism) until it affects someone he cares about (Herimone).
- *Even a character unaware of, or even oblivious to, the flaw is going to be affected by it.*

# How the Flaw Affects Characters

- As you're building your characters make a point of noting their relationship to the flaw.
- Does it benefit them?
- Does it hurt them?
- How do they feel about it if they even know it exists?
- This can help you deepen your characters and better tie them to the world.
- If you make beat sheets for your characters, it can be very helpful to include a line about the law and give a starting point for your story and an end point, showing their relationship to the flaw and how it changes throughout the course of the book.



# How Do You Build Your World Around It?

- Start with the flaw and consider the effect it has on characters.
- For example, in Harry Potter, Hermione's muggle parents and Snape's half-blood nature inform their characterization.
- It also informs how other characters (Malfoy) interact with them and how they fit into the world.



# How Do You Build Your World Around It?

Ask yourself who the flaw helps or empowers.

- In Harry Potter, it creates followers for Voldemort, even if they're not directly reporting to him, it empowers enablers like Umbridge.

Who pays a price because of it?

- Hermione deals with prejudice and slurs because of her muggle born nature.



# Key Point



- The fatal flaw is a condition of the world.
- It does not end when the conflict ends (though it may slink into the background) and rise to trouble a new generation of heroes.
- For example, fascism in Star Wars leads to the rise of the First Order long after the Empire's defeat.



# Practice

- Write down a fatal flaw for your world, something the heroes can't defeat by the end of book one.
- *For example, racism in Harry Potter.*
- *Class differences in Shadowhunters.*
- *Resource scarcity, as in Dune.*

Analyze the flaw. Ask yourself how it affects the world at large.

- What conflicts does it create?
- Are they socio-economic?
- Environmental?

Remember that governments, corporations, refugees, even villains, are just people, which means that ultimately you're analyzing how the flaw affects characters.



# Practice

- How does the flaw act in the background of your story?
- Who does it impact and how?
- *HP: Racism makes the half-bloods and muggle-born fearful and unpopular at school.*
- *SH: Having more or less angelic blood leads to prejudice against those with less or none or worse, issues with their opposites, the warlocks with demon blood.*





# Practice

- How does the flaw hinder or help your protagonist(s)?
- *HP: It makes it harder for Hermione to function and she's the brains of the outfit.*
- *SH: Jace has an extra dose of angel blood and this makes him a powerful shadowhunter.*



# Practice

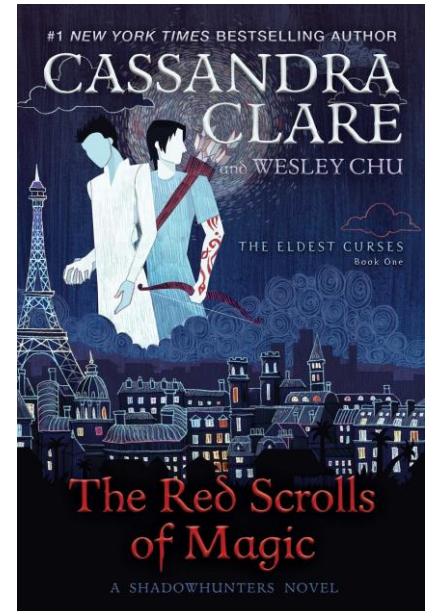
How does the flaw empower the antagonist(s)?

HP:

- *It provides Malfoy and Voldemort with followers.*
- *It hinders allies like Hermione.*

SH:

- *It leads to a conservative society that is hard on LGBTQ characters like Alec and Magnus.*



# Practice

- The flaw doesn't have to be a bad thing for your protagonist.
- Maybe it even empowers them.
- *HP: Harry is magical nobility. He is not directly affected by the racism until he sides with Hermione.*

That kind of privilege can power conflict and give your characters depth if you flip things around a bit.



# Practice

- Think about the secondary characters.
- Name a few of them on the page.
- Put some notes on the page about how the flaw impacts their lives.
- How does it inform their opinion of the world?
- What do they see that the main character can't?



# Practice

- Now that you've got some ideas around a flaw and how it impacts your world and characters, think of your story.
- Write down notes for an early scene where your protagonist can confront the flaw or be affected by it.
- For example, if poverty or income disparity is your flaw, perhaps your protagonist wants to buy a meal but can't afford it; or if your protagonist benefits from the flaw and helps another (a nice pet the dog moment) like Harry buying Ron sweets on the train.



# Practice

- Think about the secondary characters.
  - Name a few of them on the page.
  - How does the flaw impact their lives?
  - How does it inform their opinion of the world?
- 
- Is there is a scene or moment where you can demonstrate this impact in a direct manner? Write that down.





# Contrasts: Even Mordor Should Have a Little Beauty

- Who reads Grimdark Fantasy?
- A world that tilts too far toward light or dark is hard to believe in.
- Color your world in shades.
- Create contrasts to bring it to life.
- Shadows cannot exist without light, and light needs darkness to provide contrast.
- *“What power would hell have if those imprisoned here would not be able to dream of heaven?” – Neil Gaiman, Sandman*





# Contrasts

- A good example of how a contrast is useful can be class differences.
- Early in Harry Potter, Ron wants sweets from the cart on the train, but he can't afford them.
- There's a class difference between Ron, Harry and Draco in this moment.
- Having come into his inheritance, Harry buys the sweets and shares with Ron.



# Contrasts

This pet the dog moment\* does a few important things:

1. It shows you something about Harry – that he's kind and generous.
2. It shows you something about Ron – that he's poorer than other wizards.
3. It shows you that even among wizards, money and class are factors.

*\*Pet the dog or kick the dog is an early story moment where a character's action tells you who they are.*



# Practice: Contrasts

- Start with the bad guys.
- Think about the antagonistic secondary characters.
- Name a few of them on the page.
- How does the flaw affect their lives?
- How does it inform their opinion of the world?
- How can you connect one of them to the flaw in a negative way with a negative impact?
- For example, Snape. As a half-blood the flaw of racism puts him in a place where he is sympathetic to the good guys.
- The best villains usually have some contrasts. They're not purely evil or driven by simple motivations. They think they're doing the right thing: Magneto, Thanos, etc.



# Practice: Contrasts

- Now look at the good guys.
- Name a few of them on the page.
- How does the flaw affect their lives?
- How does it inform their opinion of the world?



# Practice: Contrasts

- How can you connect a hero to the flaw in a way that benefits them (though possibly not their cause)?
- What kind of privileges does the flaw afford your hero?
- Write that down.
- For example, based on his heritage, Harry should be siding with Draco. His rejection of the Slytherins and determination that the sorting hat not place him in that house show Harry rejecting privilege to choose good. It's also very clever foreshadowing: at the very beginning Harry is choosing what's right over what's easy.



# Practice: Contrasts

- Contrasts in the world building go beyond the characters.
- For example, think of a scene in your book that is entirely dark.
- Can you add a beautiful element to the darkness?
- Example: the capital in the Hunger Games and the makeover scene adds beauty to a very dark place.



# Practice: Contrasts

- Then flip that around. Think of a scene where you're showing your world at its best, its brightest.
- How can the flaw creep in and cast a little shadow to provide some contrast?
- Example: a beautiful scene of triumph and excess but the servants are gaunt with hunger. Maybe one is fired or beaten for stealing food.





# Questions?





Feel free to find me on the web at [www.davidrslayton.com](http://www.davidrslayton.com). I'm also on Instagram, Twitter, etc.

