

The Compleat Idiot's Guide To CLONING *LORD OF THE RINGS*

By

Andrew Kass

INTRODUCTION

Admit it: you want to write. And not just a letter or a story: you want to write the Biggest Quest Fantasy Novel Ever.

First the bad news: J.R.R. Tolkien beat you to it. So did the authors of *Eragon* and the *Shannara* library, each of whom managed to cop *Lord of the Rings* in large part and not get sued.

But there's the good news: **Many authors** did it with no discernible talent, and so can *you*. This guide will take you through the elements of a Really Big Epic, with examples, tips and some legally necessary variations. All you have to do is sit there and follow along, and in practically no time – a mere couple of years – you'll be signing hardbound copy with *your name on it*, priced by the pound.

Part One: The World

There's an old truism that says 'Write what you know'.

Hah! You know nothing! That's why you're writing fantasy. Your setting can be anywhere: you could even set your epic in Brooklyn, which would require no small suspension of disbelief when the dragons show up.

If we can learn anything from Professor Tolkien without actually reading him, it is that a medieval setting is really cool, and lets you get away with just about anything. Do I hear the clash of swords and the *thwunk* of arrows? Are there a few wizards handy? Some mythical beasts? No one's spoiling the game with infrared specs and a cheat-coded Uzi with unlimited rounds. Your characters have to know things and do things.

Which does not mean that *you* do. If evil Thane Viggo needs Lord Vayismere's Dark Mirror to monitor the plucky band that will bring him down in Chapter 85 of Book III, give it to him. It's *fantasy*, remember?

EXPERT TIP: Whatever you do, DO NOT set your Heroic Trilogy in a future with spaceships. That's science fiction, which requires some knowledge of fake science.

Having set the time, we must "create" the place. Your world should be furnished with the following elements:

- Cozy innocent town
- Slightly seedier town
- Monstrous manifestation of hell on earth, readily distinguishable from above
- Taverns (for dialogue, plot exposition and random meetings)
- Caves (endless)

- Lakes (fathomless)
- Mountains (Black Diamond)
- Forests (brooding)
- Rivers (wide)
- Swamps (gassy)
- Grasslands (to taste)
- A Big Honking Volcano of Doom

EXPERT TIP: It is much more effective and persuasive if your world has some real scale and scope to it. A NetherLand which can be crossed from Dweedletown to Gormid's Tor as quickly as a transit from Cleveland to Shaker Heights tests the reader's faith in the whole epic thing.

Having laid out your map – and invest in having a good map drawn, no matter how much your kid nephew begs – it's time to populate it. You don't have to worry too much about animals; in legends, they tend to play themselves, only more so. A Tolkien eagle would find the top of Sears Tower a bit cramped. Donaldson's *ranyhyn* are horses that can solve math problems when in the mood. Paolini's dragons will down the odd pint, though not buy a round themselves. Have fun with your animals; they can really pick it up on days when your characters are being listless and uncooperative.

Which brings us to bipeds. Unless you feel strongly about amoebic life forms, consider that your readers will have an easier time identifying with recognizable variants of humankind, good and bad, than with the Crawling Chaos Nyarlathotep.

That said, you have a degree of scope in selecting various racial attributes and folkways, and you don't even have to create a language to pull it off – remove contractions, make judicious use of italics, and you're on your way.

Here are a few examples that should not be omitted from your planning:

- **Cute diminutive agrarians:** Small people on farms and in villages are cute; midgets in a city weird people out. At very least, this group should be quiet, unwarlike and unassuming, because the hero and his buddies will come from this tribe.
- **Fallen warrior nobles:** You can go to town with this idea – think Camelot, the line of Isildur, and even Donaldson's Kevin LandWaster. If you have one of these guys on the quest, he must represent some mad skills. Another consideration is whether your warrior noble should be a woman; only take this on if you are in the daily society of women, so as to be able to render a reasonably recognizable example of the species.
- **Wizards (Good):** Tall, beard, hat, hair, staff, big booming voice, irascible disposition, knack for running off and turning up at exactly the right time.
- **Wizards (Bad):** Tall, beard, hat, hair, staff, big booming voice, irascible disposition; cast spells that push situations down the crapper.
- **Elves:** Must we? Sure, why not: Elves are tall, fair, magical and wise, kill flies with arrows at 100 feet and basically *pwn* you at everything.

- **Dwarves:** Dwarves are the anti-elves: short, swarthy, crafty and cantankerous. Think comic relief that also kicks ass. Females may or may not have beards, if you care.
- **Skeeves:** These are your lower level demonic minions. Their function and major cultural activity is to swarm and look gross. Ever notice that Tolkien never wrote about Orc folkways or courtly love? Your heroes get to slice up arena-sized loads of these bad boys to get to....
- **Mad Skeeves:** Your top of the food chain nasties. You know the type: slathering, fire-eating, humongously strong mega-monster warriors with some stupid fatal flaw that your heroes nail in the nick of time.
- **Road Kill:** Your basic Red Shirts (*see Star Trek: The Original Series*).
Feel free to add to this mix. One amusing pastime is to plug friends, relatives, politicians and enemies into various roles and see if anyone notices.

Part Two: The Characters

The most important thing you need to know about characters is that epics are plot-driven. The story is THE QUEST, first and foremost. If you plop in, say, a sinister-looking woodsman who turns out to be a king in disguise and Class A ass-kicker, your Quest is on its way; any “character arc” (development of traits and sensibility through experience and interaction) is a bonus, and you’re not getting paid overtime.

Let’s say, for example, that you have been deeply influenced by *Kingdom Hearts* and the Playstation version of *Lord of the Rings*. There is nothing to stop you from creating bumbling sidekicks Ronald Duck and Woofy strictly for

peripheral plot points and comic relief; nothing, that is, but squadrons of Disney lawyers.

Here are some necessary ingredients for your heroic stew:

- **The Innocent and Inexperienced Hero.**

You may easily use a kid for this role, male or female. Frodo Baggins wasn't a kid, but as a munchkin he could pass. Another approach is to play completely against this type: Stephen R. Donaldson's Thomas Covenant is a cantankerous leper (I am not making this up). His main qualifications are: (a) a ring of white gold that he does not know how to use; (b) the fact that he is a stranger to The Land; and (c) his inexhaustible fund of – despair! Hah! Talk about playing against type: part of the power of our generic innocent hero is hope. Perhaps you can come up with an alternative power to set your hero apart, such as attention deficit disorder.

- **The Innocent Hero's Asshole Buddies.**

Faithful they are. Bright they are not. They join the Quest for no obvious reason other than maybe it's their bowling night as our hero sets off. They provide varying levels of moral support and comic relief, get everyone in deep yogurt with the Skeeves, redeem themselves, and end up back at Square One, pint in hand. May have amusing names, but don't overdo it: 'Hinkin' is passable; 'Wooppiee' is not.

- **The Wizard.**

By which we mean the good, irascible, very old and wise wizard who drops the Mystic Token of Doom on the hero and skeedadles.

- **The Mysterious Warrior.**

Who *is* that guy in the deep cloak in the corner snug? He has a lean and hungry look: scruffy clothes, rough hands, a sword the size of the Washington Monument. Why, it's the long lost prince who will redeem himself and reclaim the throne, you know, good old Ara-Lance-Umbopatroid. (Need a good handle here.) 'Mitchell' just doesn't cut it, no matter how much you admire the name.

- **The Evil Kahuna.**

Writing evil is as much fun as acting it. This is your excuse to flambé every teacher who lit you up in class, every jock who ever yanked you a wedgie, every editor who sent you the cheapest possible rejection form. This character is not just evil, he/she embodies all the evil in your epic. (If you just said "Oh..." after months of walking and tavern scenes, write a battle scene -- preferably with monsters -- immediately.)

Remember, though, while it's all going The Evil Kahuna's way from about page 48 on, *you cannot let him win*, tempting though it is. In the end, he's a straw man, set up to let us (through your heroes) take him down and thus feel cleansed. Like the Mad Skeeves, The Evil Kahuna has a fatal flaw, though much, much bigger. Hubris (excess of pride) is a common fatal flaw; you might go for some other Greek-derived failing, like psoriasis.

- **Twisted Sub-Kahuna.**

This optional but useful character offers your heroes an intermediate degree of difficulty between the Skeeves and The Evil Kahuna. Twisted Sub-Kahunas like to blabber all the fiendish plans of which they know (to

compensate for excessively disciplined toilet training), which helps with plot exposition and seasoning your questers with clues.

- **A Princess.**

As in 'a young woman of royal blood': provides a potential bickering / respect / love interest arc for the Mysterious Warrior or possibly with the Innocent Hero (if not a kid or a munchkin), but *not* with the Wizard or any of the Asshole Buddies. If the only women you know are your mother, Lieutenant Uhura, Xena, Arwen and Eowyn, please promise to skip this role.

- **Random Elf Prince.**

He is there to calmly and effortlessly go nuclear on nasties when things get tough. He speaks sparingly and without contractions.

- **Random Dwarf.**

He is there to annoy the Random Elf Prince, fail, and work up into a ball of riled fury that he lets fly at the Skeeves. He does not possess enough hit points to take on a Mad Skeeve straight up.

- **Random Jerk Lord.**

This will be the leader of a potential ally who is (a) bewitched, (b) double-dealing, (c) tragically clue-deprived, or (d) any combination of the above. If he won't come around, do away with him! The forces of goodness shall not countenance impediments (and you may quote me).

Part Three: The Quest

The Golden Fleece. The Holy Grail. The One Ring. King Solomon's Mines. The Kingdom of Prester John. History and literature afford us countless examples of expeditions undertaken against long odds to—

What? Aside from giving participants the opportunity to get lost or killed in new and exciting ways, quests boil down to one of two categories:

1. Quests to find something or someone.
2. Quests to destroy something or someone.

Deviate from this simple formula at your peril. If you try to spin your quest into a series of receding goals, you risk losing the reader:

First you must find the Invisible Web of Arachniroth.

Then take this web to the Hidden Valley of Gherydryn below the Perishing Falls of Glimpt.

Once there, penetrate the endless caverns of Hhryhrm to the chamber of all-seeing Thane Fang, whom you must cover with the aforementioned web, for only in this way may the cosmos be saved from evil.

Come on. That sounds like a conference between the wizard Tim and the Knights of Ni from *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. Right now, your characters are asking “Just who in the hell do you think we are?”

Keep it simple. It's going to be a long journey, and false finish lines don't make anyone happy.

With that in mind, consider the Object of the Quest: Is it a thing or a person, or a thing to be used on a person, or a person who must do a thing with a thing?

Say it's an object: animal, vegetable or mineral? It must be a one-off, whatever it is, otherwise it's not worth the effort. A ring forged by evil in the Lava of Endless Torment is more intriguing than one found in a magical Cracker Jacks box. If a natural object, you must also be a bit selective: a rare Healing Moon-Lily, say, not the Golden Asparagus; the last unicorn rather than the last snail-darter; the Blue Gold, not the White Bauxite. Terry Brooks neatly covered this by anointing everything "*The Last Of Its Kind*".

To sum up: Your band of heroes must set off across this world of yours to find / dispose of an object / person that will enable one of them to save / slay a personage who is the key to saving / destroying said world. Simple, right? Oh, and one more thing: They have a limited time to do it. While they may enjoy rare moments of hospitality along the way, they most definitely cannot take side trips to visit Aunt Sadie in Osgiliath for Purim. If there's no rush, they could buy insurance and fob the task off on the next generation (see Baggins, B.).

EXPERT TIP: Some writers like to play coy about whether the action is real or imagined, taking place in a dream in the hero's head. Don't. Please. Thank you.

There is one further point to consider in framing your quest: College comparative literature courses. A slot in the Comp Lit syllabus at hundreds,

may, thousands of universities across our nation's world is a guaranteed annuity (see Estate of Tolkien, J.R.R.).

But how to break in to the list? In a word, subtext: What lies beneath your pellucid prose, your stirring story, your questionable quest itself?

Well, in your case, very little. Tolkien went off to the Great War with three dear chums and returned with one. Ring a bell? Could the darkness emanating from Mordor reflect the gathering storm of fascism in 1930s Europe? Get professors to ask such questions of hapless Humanities majors regarding *your* masterwork, and your fortune is made.

Suggested points for discussion:

- Discuss tragic Lord Vayismere's relation to Campbell's Hero with Many Faces.
- Compare T.S. Eliot's "bats with their baby-veined faces" from *The Waste Land* with the singing bats in the Caverns of Hhryhrm.
- The pub scene before the siege of Iduno is in a direct line from the mead hall in *Beowulf*. Cite and explain three more examples of "drunks before the storm".
- Compare the object of the quest in [YOUR NAME HERE]'s [YOUR NOVEL HERE] to that in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*.

In summary, do your homework now so that you can be the homework later.

Part Four: Set Pieces

A set piece is a scene or section that stands pretty well on its own as a setting for action or character development. It doesn't advance the plot so much as give your characters a chance to strut their stuff. Think Helm's Deep in *The Two Towers* or the Checkers ("Funds") speech in Nixon's *Six Crises*.

You can really do what you like here: If you know sailing, do a naval battle or tack through a storm. If you like rock climbing, drag your people up a summit. If you like to watch ... read on.

There are some pretty dependable set pieces you can start with:

- **The Gathering of Heroes.**

You have to introduce the characters and quest somewhere, right? Tolkien stopped *Fellowship of the Rings* cold at the Council of Elrond for some sixty pages of plot exposition and portentous utterances. Take away Gandalf's throwing down the language of Mordor and what you are left with is basically meeting minutes. Even so, if well handled this is a good way to launch your party and introduce their talents, like disappearing or being able to wag their ears.

- **Traversing the Location of Doom.**

Mountains, Forest, Cave, Lake, Privy: you know, the one with snow / spiders / Skeeves / serpents / squirt girls or other noxious ingredients. Your own superstitions do not make a chalk stripe or a sidewalk crack compelling.

EXPERT TIP: Tolkien called in the eagles any time he got his characters into a spot he could not otherwise write them out of. Try not to lean this hard on any creature, real or imaginary, especially hamsters.

- **Big Honking Battle.**

This is only a semi-climactic scene; because The Evil Kahuna never bothers to show up, you simply cannot kill everyone and say THE END, sorry.

If you think a Big Honking Battle is easy to write, read the battle of Seven Armies in *The Hobbit*, Helm's Deep in *The Two Towers*, Pelennor Field in *Return of the King*, the battle outside the keep in *The Power That Preserves*, or anything by Shelby Foote.

Clear as mud, right? That's the key: battles are confusing aggregations of very local and personal slaughter. If you're coming from a video game orientation and think that stringing together battles wins as a story outline, you have your work cut out for you. Don't worry, though: no editor is in a rush to see the result.

Battles are made of the following ingredients:

- Terrain
- Armies (and their relative armament, numbers, positions and capabilities)
- Weather
- Tactics

If you have no patience for maps with lots of arrows and blocks or Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*, and no stomach for wholesale maiming, try this:

Tenebrous saw the ranks before him stir and step off to the valley where the Black Hordes were leaching through the tarns. He looked to his left and his right at the stern faces, the raised spears, the crested shields, all set forward. He drew deep the last sweet air of the day, and stepped off with them into the shadowed valley.

** END CHAPTER **

** NEXT CHAPTER **

Tenebrous sat on the remains of a cart and leaned wearily on his spear, surveying with stinging eyes the tableau of death strewn across the valley. So many good men fallen to staunch so much evil...

Voilà! You have just spared your readers twenty pages or more of marching, hacking, retreats, advances, the miraculous appearance of the Great Flying Hamsters in the nick of time, and arrived at the same point.

- **The Great Climactic Showdown.**

Your hero has reached the end of his journey and the limits of his strength, not having slept, bathed or eaten in days. Dark skies crackle with thunder. It is time to settle accounts with The Evil Kahuna.

By this time you're probably pretty tired of them both. This may explain why so many authors are at least tempted to kill the hero as well as the villain. Well, you can, but from an aesthetic standpoint it is more satisfactory for the hero to survive *in extremis*. The reader has followed the hero all this way, all these miles, all these pages, and you're going to leave him or her with a corpse in the Castle of Dread? Bring 'em on home. It makes for a better movie.

The only other rule is that The Evil Kahuna must be defeated, preferably by a combination of the hero's guile and a mystical device. The question of wiggle room for a rematch in a sequel is entirely up to you.

Part Five: Elements of Style

Tone

A lot of fantasy writing owes its success (or lack thereof) to the tone of its prose. You may favor the thumping propulsiveness of Garth Nix, the genial chattiness of T.H. White, the cozy camaraderie of C.S. Lewis, or the heroic ur-dictionary Stephen R. Donaldson. The bottom line is, once you pick a narrative tone, stick with it.

Let's say you are a fan of Nix, White and Donaldson. You might, with the best of intentions, come up with something like this:

Gondril and Lukath ran, the demon-spawn at their heels and more echoing from side caverns between them and the impossibly distant eye of sunlight at the cavern's mouth.

Now you may wonder, dear reader, how our young friends managed to get clear of this scrape. It's really quite simple if you know the Free Magick cast for sleep, and pitch it at an octave only demon-spawn may hear.

With each chairascuroed stride they put the eldritch host further hindward, until finally they expostulated to a sun they could scarce cozen above the Field.

No. Don't.

By the same token, you want your characters to speak as we would expect one of their kind to speak. You want your Mysterious Warrior, for example, to converse in a manner more suggestive of Sean Connery than Pee Wee Herman. You want characters to act in a way that justifies what they are meant to be (see again above example), and you want them to engage other characters in a manner consistent with their putative relationship. To paraphrase Mark Twain, whose “Fenimore Cooper’s Literary Offenses” is required reading for any aspiring novelist, if a character talks like Gore Vidal at the onset of an utterance, he shall not speak like Snoop Dogg at its end.

Dialogue

Dialogue is a great way to express character and relationship by showing your creations with their own words. It is also important for them to know when to shut up. Dialogue in life may simply hold serve; conversation in a written work demands purpose. For example:

Porfirio drew himself aright on his noble steed Balhar.

“Warm for this time of year, is it not, Iathan?” he spake.

Iathan flared his great nostrils to drink of the day.

“’Tis,” he rejoindered. “Naetheless, it pleases me.”

HINT: If your characters are reduced to talking about the weather, it had better be raining fire lizards.

Paragraph Structure

Here is a basic but important question: Where should a paragraph break? How long or short can or should one be?

In general, a paragraph should lead with a sentence setting out a thought or subject, which is fleshed out by degrees until the last sentence caps that thought and hands off to the next paragraph. Thus, one-word paragraphs are necessarily freighted. One sentence paragraphs are quite acceptable in the service of dialogue or declamatory effect. If there is such a thing as an ideal hornbook paragraph, it would run four or five neat sentences.

But how long is too long? If you go by Gabriel García Márquez, two paragraphs suffice for a three hundred page novel. If you go by Samuel Beckett, one will do, sentences optional. William Faulkner could roll a paragraph for days from a single ingot of thought, and make you thank him at the end for the places you'd been.

NOTE: YOU ARE NOT MARQUEZ, OR BECKETT, OR FAULKNER. UNTIL PROVEN OTHERWISE, YOU ARE NOT EVEN AN AUTHOR. SO DON'T DO THIS:

For it was great in the day of the Sesticles, when the third moon was yet green in the sky and the River Bongard ran to the lip of the Valley Snorri, that Orowine the Serene sat in Garadwyk and ruled the affairs of men. And at his side for wife Orowine had Thelaline the Whisperer, fair and wise daughter of Lord Vidan of Schwee; and at his right hand was Chaiss the Close-Counselled, Chancellor of all the Ten Ridings... [and later that week] ... until, being mortal, they died.

Listen carefully: Nobody cares.

That is, unless you draw them in and make them care. And how do you do that? It starts with your opening lines.

The Opening

The opening is perhaps the most critical passage in your novel. It sets the tone and scene. It draws the reader in. Most importantly, it may be the only part of the book ever read outside your immediate family if it is not strong enough.

What makes a good opening? There are almost as many answers as authors. Albert Camus in *The Plague* wrote a writer who could not go on to the second sentence until the first was perfect, and not to the next until that was perfect, and so on; it should be noted here that Camus wrote very short books, not a fantasy among them. Let us look at a few other examples of how to open your novel:

- ***For it was great in the day...***

Opening with a long expository paragraph is a double-edged sword. If your command of language and detail is on a par with Tolkien or Faulkner or Marquez, you immediately weave a spell about the reader. If your skills are on the order of James Michener, you may place the reader into a suggestible trance-like state unless the reader falls asleep by page three. If your prose is on the order of Terry Brooks or Dan Brown and you don't happen to be Terry Brooks or Dan Brown, better position yourself for a rebound and a rewrite – a much leaner rewrite.

- ***Call me Ishmael.***

A simple, iconic, declarative sentence grabs attention right away. As a bonus, where the utterance has no clear connection to what follows (as in *Moby*

Dick), critics and scholars will argue over its meaning for years, even if (as with *Moby Dick*) the reading public stays away.

Incidentally, Herman Melville's opening has it both ways: that three word paragraph is followed by a long and weighty barge of prose stretching from the Berkshires to New Bedford. Draw your own conclusions.

But why not go right to the source? The very first paragraph of Book 1 of *The Fellowship of the Ring* is a single long sentence:

When Bilbo Baggins of Bag End announced that he would shortly be celebrating his eleventy-first birthday with a party of special magnificence, there was much talk and excitement in Hobbiton. [Tolkien, J.R.R., *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Book 1, Chapter 1 ("A Long Expected Party")]

Say it: *Huh?* No orcs? No Frodo? No ring wraiths? No Ring?

Somehow, this charming little Beatrix Potter opening gets us to Weathertop, Orthanc, the Mines of Moriah, Helm's Deep, the Siege of Gondor, the Black Gates of Mordor, the bowels of Mount Doom – and back again. The connection is, Bilbo has the Ring (which he plucked from Gollum in *The Hobbit*, another book entirely), he is Frodo's uncle, and he is planning to use the party as a grand diversion while he leaves Hobbiton for good and, with prodding from Gandalf, leaves the Ring for Frodo (proving once again, no one can do it to you like family).

Is there a template for us here?

Perhaps not a template, but a thought: Novels take place in a focused slice of time (unless you're James Joyce, for whom any one moment contains

all related moments, or Kurt Vonnegut, who likes to keep his options open). This means that events and relationships preceded, and indeed brought about, the events you are about to tell. This is called “forestory”, which for George Lucas comes after the current story but before the after story as long as there are paying customers.

In *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien had the advantage of referring to a previously published work, *The Hobbit*. In reading the trilogy, you feel these darker extensions of Bilbo's story occurring to Tolkien as they happen to Frodo and his companions. He has already created the world: he now dares to inhabit it fully.

So your starting point is really where all the other points come together: Create a world on a par with master world creators Terry Pratchett and Anne McCaffrey; people it with characters as deep and resonant as those of Patricia McKillip; then decide on the terrible confluence of events that are already in motion as you make your introductions.

It is a lot like life, save only that it springs from your head.

This is your quest: write the next great epic to the hearts and minds of people you will never know. Journey well!

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