

# An Interview With Rachel Kline: Authority Magazine Editorial Staff Member

\*

## Austin C. Smith

### How to Create Compelling Science Fiction and Fantasy Stories

\* \* \* \* \*

**Science Fiction and Fantasy** are hugely popular genres. What does it take for a writer today to write compelling Science Fiction and Fantasy stories? **Authority Magazine** started a new series called "How To Write Compelling Science Fiction and Fantasy Stories."

As part of this series, I had the pleasure of interviewing Austin Smith.

Austin is a Colorado native who's spent most of his life residing on the Kansas plains. After years of working in Fire & Emergency Medical Services, he is now a retired teacher living on 10 rural acres with his wife and two dogs, enjoying the quiet solitude of country living.

He recently introduced his "Companions of Fate" series with the release of **Book I: A Perilous Road** in 2023, followed by **Book II: A Fighter's Destiny** in 2024. He is currently working on the final installment of this trilogy, **Book III: A Relentless Enemy**, which he plans to release in 2027. This epic story of unconditional friendship between four adventuring companions is riveting and heartwarming, and will leave readers wanting more.

**Thank you so much for joining us in this interview series. Before we dive into the main focus of our interview, our readers would love to "get to know you" a little better. Can you share a story about what first drew you to writing over other forms of storytelling?**

Any art form is a way for the artist to express themselves, and I think we all have a bit of artist in us because we all have the need to express ourselves. It's as much a natural human need as feeling wanted and secure. Art is therapeutic for both the artist and the admirer. I don't have the talent to be a sculptor, painter, actor or singer, but I've always had an active imagination. In my high school senior yearbook, the teaching staff chose a quote to describe each of us in the graduating class. Under my photo, they placed a quote from former President John F. Kennedy: "You see things that are and ask why. I dream things that never were and ask why not."

I didn't realize at the time just how prophetic that statement was. My family moved a lot when I was young, so I was a shy loner. I loved to read and study history, particularly the medieval period, and that led me to start writing short stories in a private journal. I found refuge within the stories I wrote. I discovered a peaceful tranquility waiting for me inside my

make-believe worlds, and the desire to experience that escape became insatiable.

**You are a successful author. Which three character traits do you think were most instrumental to your success? Can you share a story or example of each?**

**Imagination:** I'm always looking for things, places, or encounters that spark an idea for a new story. I just shut out all the distractions and allow myself to ponder a new idea. Don't try to suppress, or apologize for, an active imagination. Albert Einstein once said: "Imagination is more important than knowledge. Knowledge is limited, but imagination knows no bounds."

**Transparency:** As I stated, writing is a great way for the author to express themselves. However, to benefit from self-expression you need to be honest and transparent. Writing is an emotional experience for me because when I'm developing characters or relationships, I'm literally pouring myself into them. It's my chance to purge, to get something off my chest. It's my release. By giving bits of me to my characters: my hopes and fears, my motives and desires, my regrets and demons, I make them real. Readers who don't know me personally will never know how much of me is in their favorite character, but I will.

**Persistence:** One of many good traits my parents instilled in me as a child was to never give up. For example, if I wanted to try a new sport or other activity, the rule was simple. Think it over and be sure, because if you start it, you finish it. I approach writing the same way. I've been fortunate to have seldom experienced a mental block while writing, but when I do, I don't fight it. I turn off my computer and go mow the lawn, or work out, or build something in my woodshop. I allow myself time for a mental reset, and then go back to it. I persist.

**Can you tell us about the interesting projects you are working on or wish to create? What are your goals for these projects?**

Since the release of my first book, *A Perilous Road*, in October of 2023, and my second book, *A Fighter's Destiny*, just before Christmas of 2024, I've focused on building an effective media platform with my website: [www.shadowlandsentertainment.com](http://www.shadowlandsentertainment.com). I'm currently fulfilling a commitment to a friend by editing his first fiction novel while I work on my third book, *A Relentless Enemy*. That book will complete the "Companions of Fate" trilogy, and I have plans for another trilogy with the same characters, titled, "The Myndoran Chronicles."

I was recently awarded honors with one of my short stories, *The Last Great Battle*, and have just entered it in another prestigious competition. The story is about two officers serving in an imperial army as a long, bitter war between their kingdom and several others is finally grinding to an end. They both are weary and anxiously contemplating putting down their weapons for the last time and enjoying a well-deserved retirement. I plan to write a prequel where they meet as young prodigious cadets in the academy, and use it to bookend a miniseries of stories chronicling their evolving years-long friendship and stellar military careers.

**Wonderful. Let's now shift to the main focus of our interview. Let's begin with a basic definition so that all of us are on the same page. How do you define sci-fi or fantasy? How**

## **is it different from speculative fiction?**

To me, sci-fi writing mostly produces stories involving technologies that do not exist in our world today, such as the transporters and replicators aboard the Starship Enterprise. Fantasy fiction stories are typically set in another world and time with totally made-up people, places, and events. An example of this would be *The Lord of the Rings* set in Middle Earth, while the Harry Potter series would be an exception. The existence and use of magic, along with other races of beings, are trademarks of a fantasy realm. In many stories, sci-fi and fantasy are intertwined.

Speculative fiction is a very broad umbrella, sometimes referred to as the super-genre of fiction, which includes sci-fi and fantasy, along with other genres such as steampunk, dystopia, horror, etc..

## **It seems that despite countless changes in media and communication technologies, novels and written fiction always survive, and as the rate of change increases with technology, written sci-fi and fantasy become ever more popular. Why do you think that is?**

Everyone has a measure of nostalgia in them. Back in the 80's and 90's, I thought video cassettes and DVD's would surely spell the end of public movie theatres. However, just the opposite occurred. Box office ticket sales surged. People still wanted to enjoy their movie experience the old-fashioned way. I think it's the same with avid readers; we're a stubborn bunch. An amazing number of us still want to hold a paperback in our lap and turn the pages while we lounge by the fireplace, or on our porch swing, or on a bench in a park filled with laughing, playing children. It's not just the reading that's therapeutic, it's the reading experience.

## **In your opinion, what are the benefits to reading sci-fi, and how do they compare to watching sci-fi on film and television?**

Over the years, I've heard many people say, "I'll wait for the movie." It's a trap, a time trap. Why invest a week's worth of evenings reading a story when we can just wait a few years and watch the story in two hours? We all struggle to fit everything into our day and, all too often, something must go. Unfortunately, what most of us forsake is our "me time." Reading is not only therapeutic, it's a great excuse to take time for ourselves. We have to be intentional about rewarding ourselves for a hard day. A book gives us much more detail about every aspect of a story, especially the characters, which is precisely what most of us really enjoy about a story. And best of all, it allows us—no—it forces us, to use our imaginations and exercise our minds.

## **What authors and artists, dead or alive, inspired you to write?**

Robert Ludlum, Angus Wells, J. C. Pollock, Dean Koontz, David Morrell, P. T. Deuterman, and Tolkein, of course. And the writer with perhaps the most vivid imagination of all, Jules Verne.

## **If you could ask your favorite author a question, what would it be?**

That's easy. I recently attended a book signing with Jim Butcher, a well-known fantasy fiction author, and didn't get a chance to ask him a burning question that I had. His "Dresden Files" series has been ongoing for more than 20 years now, and I can't help but think about how his main character, Harry Dresden, has changed during that time.

Although I've recently had the first two books in my "Companions of Fate" trilogy published, I actually wrote those books fifteen years ago. Now, as I'm working on the third installment of this trilogy, and planning the next trilogy to continue the adventures of my main characters, It's occurred to me that I no longer view the world through the same eyes I once did. With age and wisdom, I've come to realize that the passage of time, and the events it brings, unavoidably alters our perspective on life, and I worry that I might change the characters in my ongoing story in some discernibly negative way that could alienate my readers. I would love to get his take on that, and his opinion on whether it's something to even give concern to.

## **We'd like to learn more about your writing. how would you describe yourself as an author? Can you please share a specific passage that you think exemplifies your style?**

Whether I'm writing a short story or a novel, the story starts in my head with a single seed that blossoms like the opening pedals of a flower. I don't make a written outline; I just let the story flow. And while I may be mulling multiple story ideas in my head, I only actually work on one project at a time. To me, the most critical aspect of my story is unforgettable, genuine characters, and I like to use real life emotional dialogue to showcase that. Here is a passage from my first book, *A Perilous Road*.

Once the column of wagons reached the high road, Hunter informed Hollis he was turning back to make sure they weren't followed.

"Sure that's necessary?" the merchant asked with concern.

"Yes, sir. If more Shadow followed us into the forest, I might be able to slow them down."

"All right," Hollis said. "But we can't wait for you. Once we're on the road, we have to move fast."

"I'll catch up by dark. If not, don't send anyone back for me." He noticed Celeste look down and turn away, and her reaction wasn't lost on her father.

Hollis sighed. "All right, son. Go, but don't do anything foolish."

"I'll be back before you know it, sir." After fetching his horse, he found Celeste tending to her mount. She'd been crying; he knew when their eyes met.

"I'll do the right thing," she said with a pitiful expression. "I won't try to dissuade you."

He gently took her in his arms and pulled her close. "Have I ever told you how beautiful you are?" he asked, knowing well he'd never dared to speak such a thing.

She nodded. "Uh-huh . . . every time you look at me."

He pulled her to him and they kissed. As their cheeks gently brushed together and their lips met, he could taste her briny tears. It was intoxicating. At last, he released her.

"I must go, Celeste. I won't be long, I promise."

"Hunter, it would break my heart if you lied to me."

He smiled. "Then I shall not," he said before turning to place a foot in a stirrup. As he settled into the saddle, he looked down at her once more. She wiped her cheeks before they silently nodded to each other, and then he turned and rode away. A storm of emotion filled her as she watched him fade from sight. She didn't know what the future held for them, or if she would ever be able to give herself to him the way she desperately wanted to. But she knew that meeting him had changed her life forever.

"It never gets any easier, child."

She smiled at the sound of her father's voice as she turned to see him approaching.

"I wasn't spying, my sweet. I waited till I heard him leave."

She leaned into his comfortable embrace and he held his daughter while she softly wept. His heart ached for her. He, too, had grown quite fond of the quiet stranger who watched over her. Finally, she sniffled and leaned back to look up at him.

"I love him, Father."

"I know, child. My precious daughter has grown into a beautiful young woman who now contemplates the next stage of her life."

"Father, I'm scared. I don't know what's come over me. I've only known him a few days, yet, I feel as if I've always known him."

He gave her a knowing smile. "Let me tell you a story about your protector, my dear," he said as he turned and they began walking side by side with her arm on his.

**Based on your own experience and success, what are the "Five Things You Need To Write Compelling Science Fiction and Fantasy Stories?" If you can, please share a story or example of each.**

1) **A Solid, Fast-paced Storyline:** Just like readers of other genres, sci-fi and fantasy readers want the plot to move along at a good clip. Even those who tend to enjoy a book mostly for its endearing characters, want to be entertained. That said, I like to vary the pace of my story occasionally, to spend time building my character's personality and their relationships.

2) **Unforgettable Characters:** People are drawn to books for any number of reasons: cover art, riveting synopsis, a friend's recommendation, or a personal familiarity with the author's writing. But if you ask someone a year after they've read the book what they liked most about it, the most common answer you'll get is, "great characters." Of all the facets of crafting a novel, I spend the most time and thought developing my characters. And I always choose one or two members of the supporting cast to delve into and make them as intriguing as my primary characters.

3) **A Captivating World:** In many fiction genres the author is dealing with the real world as we know it, so what you see is what you get. Even a time setting from a few years in the future to a hundred or more years in the past limits the changes you can make. However, in sci-fi or fantasy, the potential variations in time and place for your story setting are endless. The sky is the limit, but that freedom comes with a price. You must be prepared to describe that world, not just adequately, but so vividly that the reader is transported there whenever they're reading.

4) **Subplots:** I always like to build subplots. It can be in the form of a secondary goal for the protagonist, but I prefer a different approach. Character development is my favorite part of writing, so I might pick one or two characters in the story who have a personal agenda. Perhaps something like settling a grudge, finding a long-lost friend, or an inner quest for personal peace or self-awareness. Whatever, it allows me to interject a backstory and build depth in that character, especially if I deny them resolution until the next book in the series.

5) **Imagination:** I can't say it enough. Use your imagination. Sci-fi and fantasy readers want to step up to the plate and face a blazing curve ball. They want to be surprised by something they hadn't anticipated. It is, perhaps, the most forgiving genre in that there are no limits. It's your world. You built it. Take advantage of it. Imagination is the greatest tool for both the writer and the reader in fiction.

**We are very blessed that some of the biggest names in Entertainment, Business, VC Funding, and Sports read this column. Is there a person in the world with whom you would like to have a private lunch, and why?**

Tom Selleck. I'm a huge fan. I grew up watching him in Magnum PI, and I've followed his acting career for decades. He's starred in some of the greatest westerns ever made. From everything I've read about him and seen in interviews, he is a real, genuine person, and I respect him greatly.

**Thank you, Austin, for these excellent insights, and we greatly appreciate the time you spent with us. We sincerely wish you continued success with your writing.**

**Rachel Kline: Authority Magazine**

\* \* \* \* \*