

James D. MacDonald (14 April 2006)

A transcript of the chat with Jim follows (edited for continuity and clarity):

Birol

Welcome to April's – yes, it *is* April; I just had to check my calendar – chat. Slip into something comfortable (I recommend sweats or your favorite holey shorts) and settle in.

Tonight's guest is James D. MacDonald (with a possible substitution by his writing partner Debra Doyle should he be called away for a medical emergency – Uncle Jim volunteers on his local ambulance squad).

Most of you probably know James as "Uncle Jim" from the "Learn Writing with Uncle Jim" thread on the AW Water Cooler. Or you may know him as *Yog*, the author of *Yog's Law: Money Flows Toward the Writer*, or an instructor at Viable Paradise's Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers' workshop, not to mention he's also the co-author of several science fiction books along with Debra Doyle. Uncle Jim graciously agreed to come tonight to answer a few questions in real time. We appreciate his commitment to helping aspiring writers grow in their craft.

The room is moderated, meaning it's not open for direct chatting. To ask your questions, PM Dawno. You may PM her by double-clicking her userid in the list on the right at any time. If you have any other problems, questions, or concerns, please PM MacAllister, Peter(Pthom), or me. To keep from timing out, from time-to-time PM another member. Please do not PM Jim directly.

With all that said, let's welcome Uncle Jim to the AWWCOC (the AbsoluteWrite Water Cooler Online Chat).

Uncle Jim?

Uncle Jim

Waves to the crowd. Blows kisses. "You're a lovely audience!"

MacAllister

applause, applause

Birol

applauds

Dawno

whoot whoot

Uncle Jim

+Dazzling smile+ More waving.

What shall we talk about tonight?

Birol

Feel free to PM Dawno with any questions you might have.

Dawno

Are you ready for the first question, then Jim?

Uncle Jim

Sure, fire away.

Dawno

What is the mistake you most notice new writers making?

Uncle Jim

Oh, lordie. The easy mistakes are too many adjectives and adverbs. The bigger mistake is staring the story at the wrong place. The biggest mistake is not having a story to start with. Grammar and such are easy fixes. Not having a story is very hard to fix. Mid-range, you have Telling Not Showing. (But that's actually an easier fix than you'd expect.)

Dawno

I'm having trouble imagining writing a story without having a story ... what would you say that looks like?

Uncle Jim

It looks like meandering all over the place, a set of events, not necessarily connected, that come to no conclusion -- they stop, rather than end. I'm trying to come up with an example -- Briefly: Billy's daddy was always mean to him. Even when he was growing up daddy was mean, and when he got older Billy's daddy was still mean. The end.

Dawno

Cat would like to know if you would define "starting a story at the wrong place"

Uncle Jim

Okay, a story starts when you can't summarize all the previous action in a single sentence. Or, a story starts when the characters can't say, "To heck with this; let's get a pizza." If what happens on page one doesn't affect everything else all the way to page The End, then that's the wrong beginning.

Expanding a bit -- I recall one student story from a while back. It detailed the deaths of nearly everyone due to some super-chemical weapon. This went on for some 40 pages, including a description of how Tivo works, so the readers would know how the main

character was aware of some things that happened while he was asleep. I took that, and rewrote those forty pages as:

The day after the world ended, Fred got into his pickup truck and drove to town.

Even though lots and lots of people died, in terms of story *nothing happened* in those forty pages.

Dawno

BTW folks - if you want your question anonymous please say so, otherwise I'll give your name with your question, ok?

Thank you Jim, the next question comes from JenNipps "What do most people obsess about that they really should leave alone?"

Uncle Jim

The thing that most people obsess about that they should leave alone is simple punctuation. Mostly if you play it by ear you're going to be right. Of course, you have to prepare for that by reading a lot of well-written books, but you're doing that anyway. Right?

Dawno

Thank you - HConn asks "is it true that fantasy outsells SF two to one?"

Uncle Jim

Is it true that Fantasy outsells SF? I have no idea. I do know that anytime you try to break down that market it you get lost in the squishy definitions in the middle.

Dawno

Any idea where HConn could get info on that?

Uncle Jim

I can tell you that as a group, fantasy and science fiction have represented about 11% of the fiction sold in the US, year after year, for decades. Fantasy -- the best definition of that is "Fantasy is the sort of book that Fantasy Fans read."

Dawno

Jim, I have a couple questions about elaborating on the show vs. tell - seems to confuse many new writers

Uncle Jim

Elaborating on Show v. Tell. Lessee ... Tell: Molly was angry at Fred. Show: When he got home Fred found all his clothes on the sidewalk.

Dawno

Bobb would like to know how you made it through that period where "you always seemed 'this close' to publication, but the rejections kept pouring in.

Uncle Jim

I had a day job.

Dawno

And what motivated you to keep at it since you had that day job?

Uncle Jim

The alternatives where I was were alcoholism, adultery, and amateur theatricals, and none of them really appealed.

Dawno

lol! thanks - I have an anon. question "If there was one thing you would want to impart to a new writer struggling to get a ms. into publishable form, what would it be?"

Uncle Jim

Cut up your credit cards. But, other than that ... keep trying out your stories on your friends, on your family, on casual acquaintances, on absolute strangers. When you're publishable, people you've never heard of will start asking you to see your next. I'd also suggest writing, a lot, and reading, even more.

Dawno

Do you believe that just about anyone can learn to write, with enough practice and instruction?

Uncle Jim

The answer to that, just about anyone, is "yes and no." That's like asking if just about anyone can learn to run. Sure, unless they're physically handicapped, they can. But will they win races? I can't guarantee that. I think that anyone can improve, with practice and feedback. But actually having story ... that's tough. I can teach all kinds of tricks, but those are just tricks. It's like learning to play a musical instrument. If you do it every day for three hours a day, for thirty years, you'll sound as good as someone with a natural knack for it does after an hour.

Dawno

Hoping I'm not jumping the gun - ChunkyC wants to know "Times New Roman or Courier"

Uncle Jim

Courier. Always, without exception.

Imagine you're a karate student. The master teaches you how to do a front snap kick. And you practice it every day. Then one day you get it right, and you say "Ah hah! *That's what it feels like!*"

When I teach writing I don't try to teach grammar or spelling, or much of anything other than how a writer thinks and how a writer looks at the world. The world is made of words. If you can look at the world and see it made of words, like when you're in the Matrix (in the movie by that name) you look at the world and see it made of numbers, then you're there.

Dawno

Peter wants to know "How deep a hole am I digging myself into if I write a story in First Person, Present Tense"

Uncle Jim

It's been done, successfully. No writing is wasted. If that's how the story sounds to you, write it that way. You won't know until you do it whether you were successful. And you won't actually know -- your readers will tell you.

Dawno

HConn wants to know "What question do you wish people would ask you? What do you think people should want to know but never ask?"

Uncle Jim

What question do I wish people would ask me? "Gee, Uncle Jim, can I buy you *another* beer?"

Shall I tell a story while I'm working my way around to answering that? A brief Writing Autobiography.

Many years ago, I wanted to be a writer. I was always writing stories, filling notebooks with poems and story ideas, lists of titles, keeping a journal. Then, one day, I stopped. And I got a job, and did this and that, for about fifteen years.

Then, when we were down in Panama (with the Navy, this was) I started writing again, because the boredom was so intense, and there were so few things written in English available. Eventually, I showed what I was writing to my wife, and she showed me what she'd been writing. Then we wrote for each other. After a while we started sending bits to one of our friends, and she kept saying "more! more!"

One day, there I was on leave in the USA. And we were staying with a friend who was in a writer's group. So, out of hospitality (the group was meeting right there) we were asked if we'd like to sit in. And while Doyle hid in a bedroom (being shy), I went, and took along some of what we'd been working on. And when the time came to read it, I did.

Afterward, the Pro Writer who was the Big Cheese in the group asked me, privately, "If you can write like that why aren't you submitting it somewhere?" And so, I did. And that was the life-changing question: "Why aren't you submitting?"

But no, I still don't know what question I wish people would ask me, but I do know the question I want to ask people: "Why aren't you submitting?"

Dawno

I think I speak for all of us when I say, thank you for sharing that story.

Peter had a follow up on the First Person Present Tense - "what if the dang thing is over 25k words?"

Uncle Jim

25,000 words? You aren't into novel territory yet. Have you reached "The End" yet? If not, keep going.

Dawno

A number of people have similar questions - like, you do an awful lot to help aspiring writers; are there any particular events that stand out as moments when you've felt like, "This is why I do it"? Anything that's stood out as really gratifying?

Uncle Jim

Any time I hear that someone I've talked to has sold something, I'm overjoyed. Our own Liam, for example.

Dawno

Thanks! Tilly would like to know if you get the mid-book blues and how you deal with it.

Uncle Jim

Oh, I definitely get 'em. When writing is a chore, and The End looks like it's a million miles away. What do I do? I write another five pages. It can be horrible tripe. I just do it. I give myself permission to write garbage. Not that I do -- I have fun with it. In a medieval fantasy I have the characters discuss how this adventure will look in the movie version. Sometimes I add myself as a character, and as a character have conversations with the participants in the story....

"This dialog is pretty lame," Ranulf said. "Are you sure this is the best you can do?"

"Hey, give me a break," Jim replied. "I haven't had my coffee yet."

"That's some excuse," Ranulf grumbled. "Can you at least make me witty? I've always wanted to be witty."

...and so on. It fills the pages, and pretty soon something will occur to me. In the second draft, I'll know that 'a conversation goes here' and, y'know something? I just learned something about Ranulf's character.

Dawno

I'll remember that! Along the lines of the question about what's gratifying - some of us want to know what prompted you to become an instructor at Viable Paradise?

Uncle Jim

What prompted me was this: The workshop organizer had tried to get someone famous to instruct, but that person turned her down. And in turning her down, said, "Why don't you call Jim Macdonald? He lives around there somewhere." So she called me. And I said, "I really don't have the time," and she said "We'll pay you," and I said, "Gee, I've always wanted to spend a week on Martha's Vineyard."

Since then -- Doyle and I are the only two instructors who've been there every year. My main job is working out the student/teacher schedule and keeping things on track. Plus, I get to BS about writing for a solid week.

And, there's beer.

Dawno

Ah, the organizer had to really twist your arm. JenNipps asks, "Do you do detailed character sketches/bios or do you wing it?"

Uncle Jim

The answer is ... sometimes. I do create character sheets as I go. As I write I learn things about my characters, from their eye color to their favorite foods, to the thing they hope no one ever finds out. If I write them down, I can make sure I stay consistent in the second draft.

I have done some work-for-hire tie-in novels, and with those you get very detailed character information, which you can't vary even if the plot requires it. When the plot requires it, I have to change the plot. That's where I get the advice to Cherish Your Minor Characters. I can do a lot with the minor characters and their own subplots.

Dawno

AC asks about those mid book pages - "Have you ever thought of leaving those pages in as an interesting break for the reader, too?"

Unfortunately. Those mid-book pages are what sets up the startling, yet satisfying, conclusion. How many times have you bought a book, then torn off and discarded the first 3/4 of the pages? After all, you'll get the whole climax that way.

Later on, after I've written them, I really enjoy my middle pages. No matter how lousy they looked while I was writing them, they come back and are wonderful after the book's sat in a desk drawer for three months or so. It's possible that the real beginning of the story may be in those pages. I won't know that until after I've written them, gotten to The End, and re--read the whole piece.

I also throw in scenes that I know I'll never use, like the bit in the middle of one space opera where I had Harry Houdini escape from a milk cannister full of maple syrup, just because it sounded funny.

Birol

I'd just like to interrupt again. We're at the hour mark and I promised Jim we'd only keep him for an hour and a half. If you have any questions that you've been too shy to ask, now's the time to screw up your courage and PM them to Dawno to get them in the queue.

Uncle Jim

I'm still here. I love hearing the sound of my own typing.

Birol

Thanks, Uncle Jim. Well, then, as long as you're here and we have questions, the room is yours.

Uncle Jim

One of the things I do, to help me write, is this: I imagine that my characters are actors who were hired to play the roles in my stories. And they have lives of their own that aren't on the pages. The last chapter, after The End, is a cast party, where they take on their natural personas, and the couple who were playing brother and sister vanish into the bedroom for an hour, and the solid, respectable guy turns up in a Hawaiian shirt, and the minor character who got killed in chapter two is schmoozing to find a bigger role in the next book.

Dawno

If someone isn't sure they can come up with the money for Viable Paradise, should they apply anyway?

Uncle Jim

If you aren't sure about the money, please, save up for next year. We've had people apply, get accepted, then drop out ... and it isn't fair to them, or to the others.

Dawno

Peter would like to know what prompted you to start the Learn Writing thread in Novels?

Uncle Jim

What prompted me to start Learn Writing was that I was running my mouth in all the other threads, so I figured that if I was going to be spouting off all the time I ought to be doing it in one place so people who'd had enough of me could avoid it.

Dawno

HConn says "Your pages are wonderful after three months in a drawer? I have the opposite reaction to mine. When should we stop revising?"

Uncle Jim

You should stop revising when revising stops being fun. At the point you're adding a comma in the morning and taking it out in the afternoon, you've had that story too long. If you're no longer making substantive changes. If you aren't rearranging whole scenes. Adding and subtracting characters. At the time you're down to single word twiddles -- send that story out, and start a new one.

Another Major Newbie Error: Writing One Story and spending the rest of their lives trying to sell That One Story. Be aware that you may write stories that no one but you will ever read. Imagine being a runner, and only running one race. Then taking your time from that race to other races, and comparing that time to the times of the other runners. You may never turn in a winning time if that time is the only one you have to show.

(Was that a mixed-enough metaphor?)

Dawno

Thank you. Spike would like to know if you stick to an outline - if the story starts to deviate, do you change the outline to reflect the change?*

Uncle Jim

I start out with an outline in mind -- but when the story deviates (and it will) I follow the story, not the outline. The exception to that, again, is things like movie novelizations. Those, you can't play with. (But those, too, usually have a pretty solid structure to them.)

(Except Cutthroat Island, an adventure that I, thankfully, missed. But a friend of mine got caught in that one, and hasn't been quite the same since.)

Dawno

Anon asks: "at what point should you stop taking advice from other writers and just do what you like?"

Uncle Jim

You should stop taking advice from other writers when it doesn't work for you. I keep saying, "If it works, it's right." Same with advice. If you can clearly see the way ... go with your way. The readers are the ultimate judges, not other writers.

(Oh -- commercial part of this complete chat: <http://www.sff.net/paradise/>)

Dawno

AC would like to know where he can find out more about Viable Paradise.

Uncle Jim

Hah!

Dawno

I think you just answered it! lol!

Uncle Jim

Answered that one before you asked!

Birol

Uncle Jim is good. ;)

Dawno

You're psychic as well as smart!

Uncle Jim

Also devilishly handsome.

MacAllister

There are nifty VP graphics you can use to link your own blog or site, too. :)

Dawno

What would you say to someone who wanted to start a new fiction publication or ezine?

Uncle Jim

<http://www.sff.net/paradise/images/BlueHeadline.gif>

Looking for more.

Birol

We'll let you. Meanwhile, Dawno can make funny faces at the audience.

Dawno

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8-*

that's what I meant

8o)

And now for a musical interlude ::please imagine your favorite song::

Birol

No. Please. Not singing.

Uncle Jim

There are more, I'll post 'em in the Learn Writing thread. They aren't very important as a use of everyone's time here.

Dawno

We have a question pending about how to get more info on ViableParadise and a couple more in queue.

Uncle Jim

Go to the VP website. <http://www.viableparadise.com>

Which re-directs to here: <http://www.sff.net/paradise/>

Dawno

Meanwhile with less than 15 minutes, will you have time to answer a couple more questions?

Chac would like you to say a few words about building an non-fiction platform.

Uncle Jim

Oh, goodness. That's something on the order of this: If you already are a chef with your own TV cooking show, you can probably sell a cookbook. That's all that platform is. What makes you the expert? Why would someone come to you for non-fiction? Why are you the expert?

It isn't always necessary to have a platform. For example, our own Underthecity, wrote a book about a subway system. What's his platform? None. It's his publisher's reputation for putting out good non-fiction on esoterica subjects that gives him his sales.

Dawno

I'm not sure that I caught the answer to the question about starting a new fiction pub or ezine - if you did, sorry!

Uncle Jim

Nope, didn't catch it. But my advice is: don't do it.

Dawno

Our next question is: Did anyone mentor you when you were a new writer?

Uncle Jim

The answer is: no. Unless you count my beloved wife, who wasn't published either. The writing world is small. You eventually get to meet most of the folks in it.

Dawno

Do you still have any times of doubt or blocks as a writer? (other than the mid book thing)

Uncle Jim

Times of doubt? On a daily basis. Every single day I wonder if maybe it'll all go away, or if today will be the day the editors will realize that I've been faking it all along.

So what can I do? I keep faking it.

Dawno

Dawno wants to know will you be at LACon?

Uncle Jim

No, that's a bit out of my range.

Dawno

Oh well. :-)

Uncle Jim

I mostly stay in the Northeast.

Dawno

yall would like to know where you get your story ideas.

Uncle Jim

Me, I play Mix 'n Match, then file off the serial numbers. For example, mix and match Sweeney Todd with Beauty and the Beast. Then set it in a small New England town in 1863. There you go! New story!

Dawno

:-) I seem to recall a recent exercise in *Learn Writing* that was along those lines ... HConn asks "how do you research a novel?"

Uncle Jim

I research a novel by going to the library and reading every word they have on the subject. Here's how I know I'm ready. I imagine I'm a contestant on Jeopardy. And the category is Whatever The Subject Of My Novel Is About. And I get a Daily Double. And before the answer (to which I must find the question is revealed), I look ol' Alex Trebec in the eye, and say "All of it, Alex. Every penny." If I can do that, I've researched the novel enough.

I once wrote a novel set in gangland Chicago. Prohibition. I know what day of the week Bugs Moran got out of jail (he was in for breaking and entering). I also know what brand of cigarettes Bugs Moran smoked. And I know where Johnny Torrio is buried, and I know

what's in his mausoleum. Are any of those things in the novel? No, they aren't. But I know them.

Dawno

Which brand? :-)

Uncle Jim

Clown brand.

Dawno

Not something you can find today.

Well, I see it's past the half hour - Birol?

Birol

And based on backstage conversation, I believe there's no more questions in the queue either?

Dawno

Nope...ok, Birol - stage is yours again.

Birol

Jim, I see your audience is starting to shift in their seats. I'm going to open up the room for conversation again and let everyone say their good-byes.

Uncle Jim

You've been a lovely audience! Don't forget to tip your waitress! I recommend the chef's special!

Dawno

applaud, applaud

Uncle Jim

I'll be here all week!

(general banter and hubbub as the audience thanks Jim)

Birol

Thanks so much for doing this, Jim.

Uncle Jim

No problem.

And I'm happy to report that no one in town appears to have had a heart attack over the past hour and a half.

Dawno

albedo! I forgot that question for you!! :-(I'm sorry.

Uncle Jim

What question?

Dawno

albedo wanted to ask if he could buy you another beer.

Uncle Jim

Sure! Whatever's on tap, except Lite.