

The *WD* Interview



George R.R. Martin

AT THE TOP OF HIS GAME

Who says you have to write a book a year to succeed in publishing today? For the author behind *A Game of Thrones*, the best things come to those who wait.

BY RICH SHIVENER

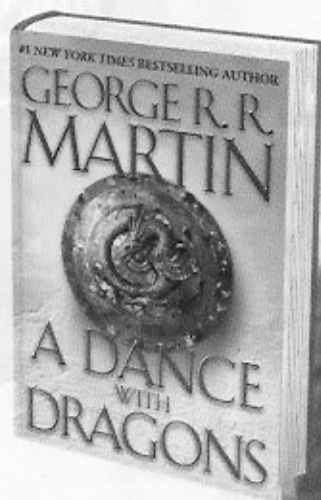


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"Sometimes you have to wait." It's a Tuesday afternoon and George R.R. Martin is talking about *A Song of Ice and Fire*, his epic fantasy series that began in 1996 with *A Game of Thrones*, now a hit HBO series of the same name. He knows that fans are clamoring for the series' final two books, *The Winds of Winter* and *A Dream of Spring*, and he knows that a very vocal batch of them want them now—rendered impatient by the five-year gap between the third and fourth books, and the six-year wait for the 2011 release of the fifth. But they'll have to be patient. After all, the books are heavy volumes, averaging 850 pages.

"I've never been a fast writer, and I've never been good with deadlines ... and the vast majority of my fans seem fine with that," Martin says. "I get tons of great letters saying, *All we care about is how good the books are. Take as long as you want.*"

For Martin, 64, the path to bestselling success was not a rush to the finish, either. Early in his career, he wrote short stories and novellas, graduating in 1977 to his first novel, *Dying of the Light*, which garnered Hugo and Locus nominations. He wrote two more to similar praise, but the big commercial failure of his fourth, 1983's *The Armageddon Rag*, soured his outlook on the form, and he shifted his focus to teleplay writing for CBS. There, he penned episodes of "The Twilight Zone" and "Beauty and the Beast," and between TV gigs edited short-story collections and anthologies. All of that work and more, plus a love for medieval history, would ready Martin to return to novel writing and create his magnum opus: *A Song of Ice and Fire*.

His flagship series about rival kingdoms unravels in a universe riddled with lust, treachery and family affairs—and has racked up a mountain of accolades and awards along the way. His new home at the top of bestseller lists led *Time* to brand him "The American Tolkien" in 2005, and by 2011 had even earned him a spot on *Time's* 100 "most influential people in the world" list.

Martin writes with a certain magic that transcends fantasy and science fiction, roping in audiences far beyond the usual genre boundaries. As a result, the series has transformed the writer into a living pop culture

phenomenon. These days, it can be nearly impossible to catch up with him. Here he's at home, writing the next *Ice and Fire* books and editing anthologies. Here he's at Comic-Con, posing for a curious Random House photo-op with *Fifty Shades* author E.L. James. Here he's at BuboniCon. ChiCon. ConQuest. LoneStarCon. ConCarolinas. MystiCon. The Clarion Writers Workshop.

Still, he generously found time to talk with WD and share some words for writers wondering how they might tap into Martin's kind of magic.

A Song of Ice and Fire has such complex story lines. How do you juggle them so deftly?

With a certain amount of difficulty. Sometimes I think I threw one too many balls in the air, and I rather wish that instead of juggling 12 story lines, I were juggling six. Once you have thrown a ball in the air, you are obliged to keep on juggling it as best as you can. Sometimes this is where rewriting comes in—especially if I neglect something or a contradiction sneaks in. Not to beat the juggling metaphor to death, but it's like I drop the ball and have to pick up the material.

On a good day, how much do you write?

Probably no more than four or five pages. I think on the best day I've ever had in my life I wrote 20 pages, and that was 20 years ago. I'm happy if I can finish a few pages in a day.

The process with the *Ice and Fire* books involves a great deal of rewriting. The first thing I do when I get up in the morning is pull up what I did yesterday and start revising it, polishing it and making it a little better. Hopefully, by the time I've dealt with whatever I did yesterday, I've built up some momentum, then I can go in and add some new pages.

Do you spend more time revising and editing than writing?

It's all kind of continuous. I don't write a first draft and then go back and write a second draft. I'm writing new pages as I write old pages; I'm restructuring, etc., etc.

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It's interesting for a guy my age to reflect on how different my working methods have become since the '70s, when I was writing everything on a typewriter. There was a great deal less revision then because it was so cumbersome. I think the ease of restructuring and repolishing on a computer leaves one to do more of it.

Are stories ever really finished?

You could always use more time, but sooner or later you have to pry it out of your hands and get it out there. ... The question is, *When* is it finished? I think every writer faces the situation where you're suddenly two weeks away from the book being due, and what do you do? Some writers slap on an ending and work very hard to wrap it up. I decided long ago not to do that. I wish I could make the deadlines, but I'm a slow writer, and I think I'm over-optimistic when I sign contracts. The question is, *When is the book ready? When is the book in the condition that I want it to be in?* That's when I send it in.

A segment of your fans is known for being vocal that you're not releasing books as fast as they'd like. How do you respond to that?

There is really no answer that will satisfy anyone, which is something I learned more than 10 years ago. Ultimately, the only thing that is going to matter is how good these books are. If people are still reading me 50 years from now, as they're still reading Tolkien, the people who pick this up in 2070 are not going to be saying, "How long did he take to write these books?" They're just going to be judging if the books are good or not. That's my criteria.

In addition to the hit TV show, *A Game of Thrones* has also been adapted into popular games and even a graphic novel series. Have those adaptations influenced your writing?

They haven't, really. All of these secondary projects—be it the TV series, the critical essays, the games—have their value, and fans seem to enjoy them, but the only canon is

the books. The stories have their own demands, and the characters and the worlds are very real to me.

Your prose is often praised for being so vivid, and for its flow. Can you describe how you craft a sentence? In my first drafts, I tend to be wordy, and then in my final drafts, I tend to be cutting things. I probably over-describe. I'll write, *John got up from the chair and walked across the room and pulled up the Venetian blinds, then lowered the window, latched it, and returned to his chair.* Then I change it to, *John got up and closed the window.* [Laughs.]

Your characters are also strikingly multifaceted.

What's your best advice for crafting characters?

One of the big things that distinguishes the strongest fiction from writing that's perhaps without depth is a real understanding of what real human beings are like. From my point of view, I don't see heroes and villains; I see very flawed human beings. All of us have good in us; all of us have evil in us. All of us are capable of acts of heroism, acts of selfishness, cowardice, or what we might call villainy. We all have reasons for what we do. You don't just have people who wake up in the morning and say, "What evil things can I do today, because I'm Mr. Evil?" People do things for what they think are justified reasons. Everybody is the hero of their own story, and you have to keep that in mind. If you read a lot of history, as I do, even the worst and most monstrous people thought they were the good guys. We're all very tangled knots.

You've been a faculty member of the Clarion West Writers Workshop. What do you find aspiring fiction writers most often need to focus on improving? Plot? Character?

It really depends on the writer. I do think with a lot of them it's the structure of the stories. You see a lot of young writers who have interesting ideas and a certain skill with words, but their story is not a *story* ... it's more a vignette.

Writing is something very hard to teach in the abstract. That's a great virtue of Clarion [which facilitates intense critique sessions with students and instructors]—you're dealing with actual stories. You're not giving general lectures. You're dealing with a specific work of art, and saying what works about this story and what doesn't. It's a great process for pulling people apart and putting them back together so they work better.

Over the course of your career, what have you learned about the business of writing?

The field is constantly changing—that's the one thing about a career in writing. Just when you reach the stage that you understand how publishing works, and how to build your career, then all the rules change. I had it all figured out by 1977, but then the rules changed completely, and they have several times since. And now with e-books and self-publishing, we're seeing another watershed change. It's not a career for someone who likes security. You have to constantly adapt—whether it's to new modes of publishing, or a new subgenre, fashion or entertainment. A writer needs to be flexible, and I think I am.

You also edit collections and anthologies. What do you look for in a story? What makes a story great? I think the characters. I think it's the setting, too. I want a story to take me to a place that I've never been to before and make it come vividly alive for me.

I hate stories that are predictable. I want to get engrossed in a story and not know what's going to happen next. I always try to make my own fiction a little unpredictable, and as a reader, I love stories that surprise me and delight me.

Where do you think science fiction and fantasy are heading?

Right now, science fiction is in a down cycle—it has been for a decade, but I think it's coming back. There are some very popular and accomplished young science-fiction writers who are bringing back classic space opera, and tales of spaceships and aliens. I think epic fantasy is a major genre, and I think it will continue for quite a while.

How has your experience writing for TV shaped your other work?

As William Goldman said in his book *Adventures in the Screen Trade*, structure is everything. And I think my

sense of structure has improved and so has my ear for dialogue. Writing dialogue that actors are going to have to speak aloud is very different than writing dialogue that just appears on the page. I think my dialogue got sharper, funnier and better, all told.

Also, the act-break technique that I learned from "Twilight Zone" and "Beauty and the Beast" is a technique I carried over to *Ice and Fire*. Even though we don't have commercials between the chapters, I do alternate between points of view. I end each chapter with a cliffhanger, resolution, a turn, a reveal, a new wrinkle ... something that will make you want to read the next chapter of that character. But of course you can't, because now you have to read about the other six characters, so you're always anxious to read more. At least, that's the theory.

Where else would you like to take your writing?

I have a lot of other books that I want to write. Science fiction books, fantasy books, horror novels. ... I have ideas for hybrids that don't fit anything, and I would like to try something different.

What's the hardest part about writing a series, and this series in particular?

It's all hard. The juggling of all the plotlines and characters is hard, and maintaining the chronology also has some difficulty. Meeting my deadlines is extremely hard, so hard that I haven't done it for years. Fortunately, I have very forgiving editors and publishers who are willing to cut me some slack. ... In the early part of my career, I did everything possible to avoid having deadlines. I wrote my books before I sold them. Nobody even knew I was working on a novel until it was finished, and that worked very well for me.

It doesn't work with a long series like *Ice and Fire*, unless I wanted to vanish from public sight for 20 years while I finished all seven volumes.

What else is hard? The words are hard. You get these visions in your head of what the scene is going to be. You have a big battle scene, let's say, or a feast, or a love-making scene. It doesn't matter what the scene is. You can see it and you can hear it, but you're still staring at a blank screen. That's the nuts and bolts of writing. It's great to see the cathedral, but you still have to build it one stone at a time. A tremendous amount of effort goes into finding the right words. **WD**

Rich Shivener is a teacher and journalist based in Cincinnati.