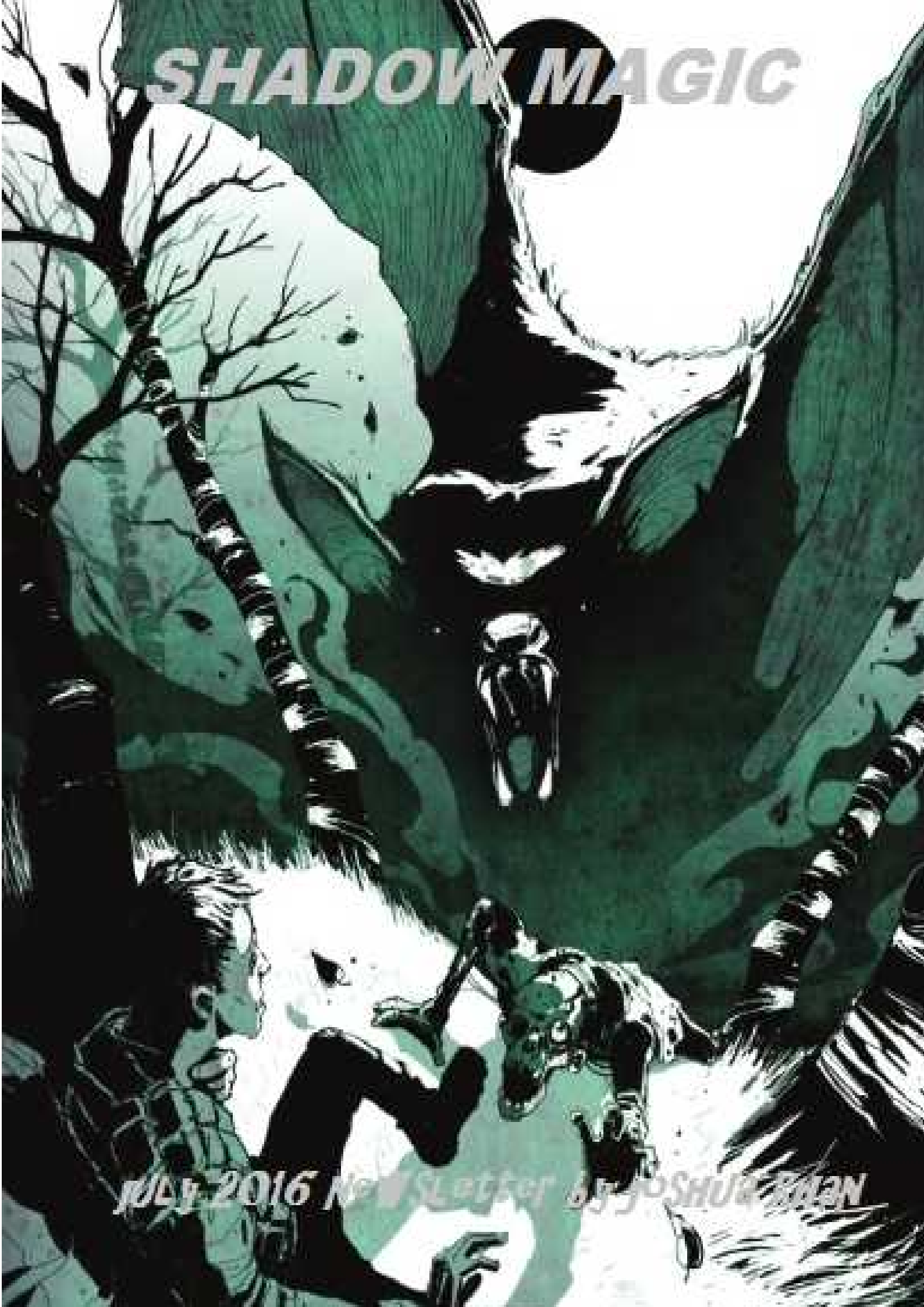


SHADOW MAGIC



MAY 2016 NEWSLETTER BY JOSHUA BAER

HELLO!

Thanks for signing up on the Shadow Magic newsletter and I hope you'll enjoy issue #2.

I've decided to do things a bit differently here and rather than do one big, single theme, break it up a bit with a story, background on the world of Shadow Magic and finally an article on writing, which may be of some interest to any of you budding novelists out there.

Some of you may have seen the cover reveal of the sequel to Shadow Magic. I do want to tell you so much about Dream Magic, but I really can't, it's too early as yet! But as we get closer to publication (April 17), I'll be feeding in little clues and further background information, linking Shadow Magic to Dream Magic so you get a greater idea of what's at stake.

A word of warning. Last month's newsletter was an introduction into Shadow Magic. You didn't need to have read the book to understand what was going on. What follows from now on will be all the richer if you've read the book. Simply put a lot of this is behind the scenes world-building. As any fantasy fan knows this is where a lot of the hard work is, and the fun. We want to get a sense of how big the writer's ambitions are, and the scope of the setting. The challenge is to make it all feel real, there to be an internal logic, even in the fantasy. I took two years to write Shadow Magic, and much of that time was putting the pieces in place, as well as the words on the page. There are family trees, more maps, secret societies and a whole mythological past yet to be revealed...

Till next month,

Josh

Cover by Ben Hibon, interior art by me!

A TRAVELLER

A Shadow Magic story by Joshua Khan

“Ah, friend! I see you are on the road north, like myself? Perhaps we could keep one another company, yes?”

The man perches himself on a mile stone, and he looks friendly enough. I tighten my grip on my sword hilt, making it clear, in not so many words, that I am no fool.

Yet he is thin, old, no threat to me nor anyone else.

Why would such a threadbare vagabond want with the likes of me, or of the kingdom of Gehenna?

I nod, curtly, and he gathers his pack and we fall into step together.

He looks up at the stars, smiling. “A cold night and yet we have a few miles before we reach any shelter.”

I frown. “I was told there were no inns along this road.”

The man smiles and points a bony finger ahead. “Oh, there is a place to dine, not so far from here.”

I watch him, sideways. Best be cautious, even with beggars.

It is cold, and I huddle my shoulders deeper into the cloak. I left in haste, as murderers do, blood still on my sleeve and the cry of the watch ringing in my ears. Just time enough to gather a small purse of silver—my victim was poorer than I’d hoped—my sword and this cloak, taken off the dead man’s shoulders and not as thick as I’d wished.

Still, I live, I breathe, and there may be richer pickings in Gehenna.

Gehenna, a land only the daring and desperate venture. I smile to myself. Am I not both?

We reach a crossroads. There is a sign, but the moonlight is too faint to make out the words. Both paths lead only deeper into Spindlewood. And darkness.

“You have not been to Gehenna?” asks the man, noticing my indecision at the offered paths. He gestures to the left. “That way.”

I grunt, and take the left path.

I walk in silence. My companion does not.

He laughs as a host of bats wheel and whirl above us. “Look, they herald our coming! Gehenna is poor in soil, poor in coal and decent grazing but, oh my, tis rich in so many ways. Bats, it has plenty of. The nobles here use them to carry messages.” He flutters his hands. “Ffft. Form Castle Gloom to Sable Manor. Then from Tomb Town to the Troll Teeth Mountains. Back and forth, flapping on their leathern wings. They are beautiful, are they not?”

“Bats carry diseases,” I answer. I want him to shut up.

“Not just bats,” says the man. “There are so many types of diseases, I believe we all carry something... foul.”

My hand drops back to my hilt. “Do you mock me, old fool?”

He steps away, and bows. “My humblest apologies, my friend. I meant nothing. I can see that you are a bold warrior, and I am, as you say, just an old fool. But I have been to Gehenna before, so wish, in exchange for a meal, to give you some advice.”

“I have little food,” I reply.

The man’s eyes sparkle. “Then perhaps just a drink? To warm my old bones?”

I tap the wineskin dangling from my shoulder. “Perhaps. If your advice is good.”

He nods, then does a spindle-boned skip. “Gehenna, what to say about the kingdom of darkness? Where to begin? Shall I start with the living, or the dead?”

I scoff. I’ve heard the old wives tales about the dead that walk in this kingdom. Tales to frighten children. I’ve seen enough dead men. Made a few myself and not one stood up, nor as much blinked an eye when I was finished with him. I fear nothing from the grave. “Tell me about the living, fool.”

He smirks. I do not like the cleverness in his eyes. Yet, if he was so clever, why does he wear just rags? “Then be warned, my brave companion, that there are three great killers in this world, and Gehenna is home to one of them.”

“Tyburn,” I reply. “I have heard the name.”

“And does not your heart freeze at the sound of it?”

I shrug my shoulders. “There are many tales about Tyburn, but tales grow in the telling. He may be as good as they say, and he may not.”

Still, I am no fool. I intend to stay well away from Tyburn.

“What of the rulers?” I ask. “They say Lord Iblis Shadow is a great sorcerer.”

The man claps. “Indeed, great he is! He respects the old ways, the ways of the ancestors and those that live, either side of the grave. He hosts a ball every Halloween, an elegant masquerade! You should see it!”

“Masquerade? Why? Are the Gehennish so ugly?”

“Ugly? You would not think that if you but glimpsed his wife, Lady Salome! There is no fairer creature in all the New Kingdoms! No, the masks are so you do not know who is from the living, and who is from the lands of the dead. So, for one night, the two worlds mingle and celebrate together, as is the way here.”

I shiver. It is cold and my cloak is thin.

The old man sighs, and sits himself on a stone. “Yet the dead may rise at any time, not just on Halloween.”

I peer down the path, expecting the light of an inn. But it is dark. “I thought you said there was a place to eat?”

“We shall dine here, my friend,” says the old man. He taps his fingers upon the stone. “Then I shall sleep again.”

I back away and draw my sword. “Stay away, old fool. I will kill you.”

He merely smiles. “I do not doubt it. I can smell a killer from some distance. Your scent brings me from my bed.” He glances down.

The stone he sits is a gravestone. We have stopped at a grave, and the earth around it is churned and broken.

The man moves in a blur. One hand grips my wrist, crushing the bones, making me drop my sword. I cannot scream, as he holds me by the throat. He leans closer and sniffs, closing his eyes as if overwhelmed by some heady perfume. “So sweet, the smell of fresh murder.”

“I have given you advice,” he smiles and his fangs are revealed. “Now about that drink you owe me...”

THE END

The Great Houses of Sorcery, Part One

Though the age of magic is long past and the descendants of the Six Princes are now as mortal as any woodcutter, there remains a mystique, a glamour, upon those born within the great houses.

To belong to a great house is to be apart, and above, all others. Though the blood of magic is thin and weak, it is still the blood that once flowed through legends.

It is the same blood that ran through the veins of Qin Tang Typhoon, who built a palace in the thunder clouds. It is the blood of Mortis Shadow, in whose gray eyes you would see the reflection of your own death.

The history of each great house would fill a dozen libraries and to recount even half the tales would take ten lifetimes.

So I offer you a glimpse of each of the six great houses of sorcery and list some of the more prominent lesser houses, noble families distantly related to each great house.

From this you may discover what they once were and what they have become.

House Shadow of the lands of Gehenna

Lesser Houses: Sable, Ebon, Night, Eclipse

The lords of darkness and the masters of the undead. The Shadows are also the guardians of the Veil, the boundary between the lands of the living and the dead. In the far past these two lands lay side by side and travel between the two was easy. However as the ranks of dead swelled during the War of the Princes, it was feared that the living would be overwhelmed. The dead miss the warmth of living things and have a great hunger for it. The Shadows took it upon themselves to protect the living. Deals were struck that the dead would be honoured

and not forgotten and once a year they would be permitted to journey across the Veil and dance with the living. This became the great Halloween Ball.

The current Lord Shadow, Iblis, is well-loved within Gehenna. He is a powerful sorcerer for this age and has two children by his wife, Salome, formerly of one of the lesser houses. Dante is the heir-apparent and by all accounts as accomplished as his father in the arts of necromancy. The daughter is called Lilith but Lord Iblis is young and it is expected there will be more sons to come.



House Solar of the city states of Lumina

Lesser Houses: Crystal, Brilliance, Mirror, Blaze, Argent

Great rivals to House Shadow, whom they share a northern border, the Solars are masters of light and illusion. It is said that one of the current duke's ancestors cast such an illusion he made the entire country vanish for a seven years. How its inhabitants managed in their everyday lives, being invisible to all including themselves and one another, is not recorded.

Lumina is a rich, fertile country. Unlike the barren and cold Gehenna it is covered with fields and orchards. Duke Solar rules from the Prism Palace but his country is controlled by a string of semi-independent city-states, all lesser houses related to House Solar. They compete with each other for the duke's favour and by that way he keeps hold of his power, no one rival is able to gather enough support to topple him.

Of all the descendants of the Six Princes, it is widely agreed that the Solars are by far the fairest. They are golden beings that shine like the sun. Some say it is because the Solars have worked hardest to keep their bloodline pure by arranging marriages with other magical families. Some, more mean-spirited, say their beauty is but a mask, for the Solars were always masters of the magic of illusion.

Recently the Solars have celebrated the birth of a son, named Gabriel. After twelve daughters the duke declared a week-long public holiday. It is said that Gabriel is guarded by six paladins, day and night. His every whim is catered for and all the lesser houses delivered fabulous gifts and treasures at his naming day. Let us hope such attentions do not spoil the boy.

Mention must be given to the Solars' elite warriors, the paladins. These are sons (and sometimes daughters) of noble houses sworn to serve the Solars from an early age. Training is given by the greatest weapons' masters of the New Kingdoms and each worth ten normal men in battle.

House Djinn of the Sultanate of Fire

Lesser Houses: Efreet, Inferno, Magma, Furnace

If Solar's problems stem from not having enough sons then the sultan's problems arise from having too many. At last count he had five, and given the number of concubines in his harem, there will no doubt be many more.



The sultanate does not follow the laws of primogeniture, the ancient rule that the eldest son inherits all. In the south ruler-ship is passed down to the strongest, the most accomplished, sorcerer. This has promoted an unhealthy atmosphere of lethal rivalry. Each son tries to outdo his brothers and also eliminate them. It is an ancient tradition and the sultan himself slew five of his brothers in his climb to the throne of fire. It is rumoured four yet remained locked in the deepest dungeons of his fiery citadel.

Some attempts have been made to limit the bloodbath that inevitably follows the death of the ruler, including formal duels between the best of the sons, as well as an array of quests where the rivals recruit allies and mercenaries to achieve the goal, all in an allotted time. The search of the egg of the phoenix is a celebrated tale, having taken place two hundred years ago and led to the rule of Sultan Ahmed, known also as 'Fire-Eyes'.

All of the great houses have an executioner, an ancient and well-respected role necessary to the smooth running of any kingdom. The sultanate, as in so many ways, does things slightly differently. Unlike the other houses, where the executioner is a single person, House Djinn employs a cult of killers, often orphans trained from birth in all the arts of sudden death. When a new sultan is crowned, he will select a new executioner from this group. Sometimes the choice is easy, other times there is fierce competition and the would-be executioners enter an arena and remain within until one, and only one, emerges.

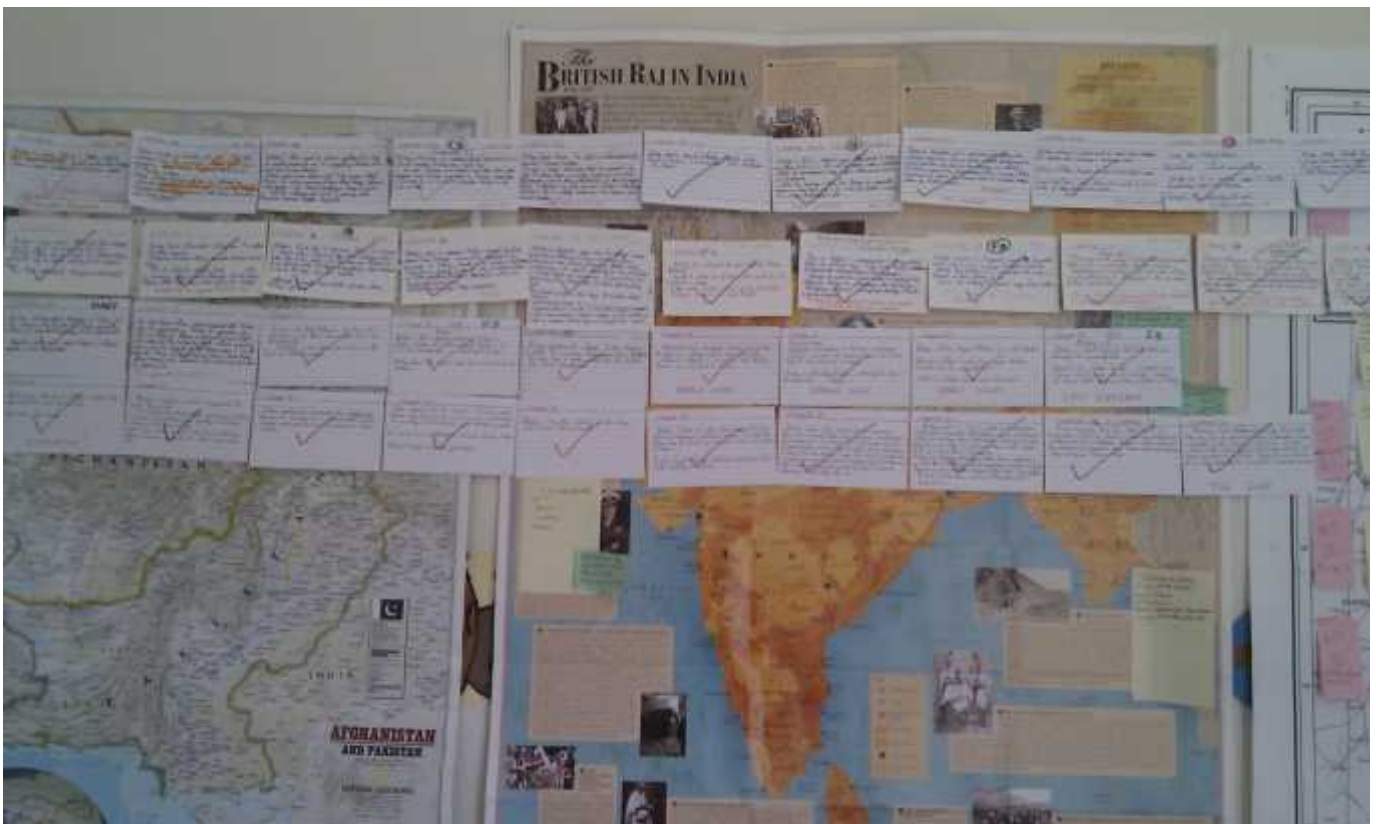
The current sultan is old, and powerful. He is almost a being of fire now and when he speaks flames roll from his tongue. He wears clothes of copper and brass than hiss and smoke as no normal cloth can touch his skin without being set alight. Ice is imported from the north and he sleeps upon snow and then, for a short period, his flesh is cool enough to touch. One can only assume it is during those short interludes of coolness that he makes his visits to his harem to add to the count of sons.

THOUGHTS ON WRITING

This has come up on several of my talks so I'll pick it up here. It's all part of character creation. So are you sitting comfortably? Good, I won't be long.

Okay, we all know drama is CONFLICT, right? Simply put all stories are about opposing forces trying to get or do something. You want a good guy, you want a bad guy.

Or do you?



You've two types of conflict, Internal and External. External is when the hero is out fighting some villain. He doesn't worry about the righteousness of his cause, he knows he's the good guy and it's as simple as that. Most war films and most Bond movies are all about external conflict. See the guy in the Nazi uniform? BAD GUY. You can bomb him, shoot him, do all sorts of violent and socially unacceptable things to him and no-one will mind. Seriously.

Ditto anyone with a kaftan, turban and AK-47, KKK hood, Soviet uniform (for those of us who grew up watching 1980's action movies) or gang colours and generally people with a poor grasp of English or (ironically) a very good grasp of English (why are the bad guys always from English public schools*?). These are all codes for 'we're not engaging in any moral conflict issues here, so move along'.

Try and avoid these sort of stories. They are exciting, sure, but simple storytelling. They suit the visual medium better than the literary one, mainly because explosions don't work so well on paper, or Kindle for that matter.

Internal Conflict. That should be your mantra. The ONE THING books do better than any other medium is explore the inner mind of the characters. So give them something worth exploring. Doubts, self-criticism, confusion and moral dilemmas. After all, the entire canon of Russian literature and most of YA romance is built on this! It works because it's what the medium does best. There endeth the lesson.

(*Oh, for the Americans reading this, first, let me say 'Hi!' then explain what we in England call public schools you would call VERY EXPENSIVE private schools where the child needs to be entered more or less the moment they're conceived for any chance of getting in, unless they happen to own a country or small European principality).



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