

PANDORA: CONTAGION

Contagion is the second thriller in the *Pandora* series about mankind's battle against extinction from pandemic as told by the Miller family. As a reader, I have always been drawn to realistic or hard science fiction, as opposed to fantasy, because I enjoy learning something along the way. Maybe in establishing the plausibility of a scenario there's an interesting detail in the underlying science. Or maybe a procedure or a protocol leads to an unforeseen but instantly credible plot twist.

The trick, of course, is to balance explication of the relevant details with the plot's pacing, drama, and action. The best time to explain how to load, aim, and fire a rifle and the ballistic characteristics of its projectile is not while your character is frantically pulling a trigger. But everyone needs a build-up to or eventually a break from the action to avoid sensory overload and emotional exhaustion. So if you want to talk about rifles, a better time might be when the sergeant hands the thing to the civilian and says the pointy end is called a muzzle.

But how important is plausibility and realism? Hard science fiction is slave to the possible, whose horizons expand to open new landscapes to modern writers with every technological advance. Fantasy writers, in contrast, can depart from the known laws of physics. But tellingly, one tried and true rule of thumb employed by the best fantasy writers is that they should depart from the realistic only sparingly, and thereafter remain strictly faithful to the new laws of their universe. Their princess can't emerge unscathed with her infant dragons from a raging fire then burn herself on a hot pot of tea. So, in a broader sense, both fantasy and hard sci-fi follow rigid rules. They vary only in the degree to which they ask readers to suspend disbelief.

As a discovery writer, and not an outliner, I often find myself following the science. I might have an idea that the plot is heading one way only to find that my research sends me in an entirely different direction. That can be its own form of entertainment. For a hard sci-fi writer, research is absolutely required. It is also, as a rule, boring. Those "Aha!" moments, in which plot points materialize out of thin air as you study how viruses invade a cell, are welcome respites from your otherwise dreary, remedial reeducation.

In sum, I like to write what I like to read, which is both apocalyptic sci-fi and scientific non-fiction. So in a sense, writing books like my *Pandora* series is entertaining as a writer, a researcher, and a reader. And the best perk of writing books I've discovered? You can make them turn out any way you like. Many a time I have planned to kill off a character only to find myself unable to pull that proverbial trigger. Two people who should fall in love, do fall in love. And for the character you've finally grown sick of? Sorry, man. It's time.