

The making of the *Odyssey Cycle* storyline Caught in the Mirari's Wake, Part 4

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Part Four: Homework

To me, brainstorming ideas for a story is the most enjoyable part of the creation process. That's probably why I have a drawer full of story ideas just waiting to be written (not to mention all the plots rambling around in my brain). The truth is, coming up with ideas is the easy part -- especially when you're surrounded by creative people. Taking all those ideas and writing three 90,000-word novels out of them -- that's the hard part. But to complete the process of bringing the *Odyssey Cycle* story to the fans, that's what the authors had to do.



As I was preparing to write this series of articles, I had a chance to ask Vance Moore (author of [Odyssey](#)) and Scott McGough (author of [Chainer's Torment](#)) a couple questions about their writing processes. Then, after reading their responses (it's good to be last), I answered the same questions, drawing upon my experiences writing [Judgment](#). In this article, we'll take a look at how the *Odyssey Cycle* story grew from the collection of characters, places, and plot lines, into a trilogy of novels. (If you need to catch up on what happened at that summit, go read [part one](#), [part two](#), and [part three](#).)

Cast of Authors

[J. Robert King](#)
Jess Lebow
Daneen McDermott
[Will McDermott](#)
Scott McGough
[Vance Moore](#)

Interview with Vance

Tell me about your style and approach to writing. How do you go from plot to finished novel?

The outline is king. I try to expand with each new version until the novel is complete. What general idea forms the basis of the novel? For *Odyssey* it is the chase or journey. Kamahl comes to the tourney complete. It is his life's dream and he realizes it. The pits and his contest with the dragon could represent his birth into a greater world. Like a child, he is primarily selfish and pursues his wants without any moral basis. He thinks honor draws him after the Mirari, but it is only base desire that drives him. His friendship with Seton drags him into a wider world, and his victories in the pits become less meaningful. At the coast he works on technique, and the victories are less important than growing more skillful. Kamahl is growing. Laquatus is evil because he lacks this vision beyond himself.

In some ways Kamahl grows through hard work as the ambassador satisfies his appetites more and more. Or, perhaps everything I just said is crap and I just go from A to B to C.

What do you do to help you get through the process of writing?

The rewrite is key. I always leave out too much in the first draft. The ideas build up in my mind until they explode out onto the page. My first drafts are heavy on action but lack tones and shades. Putting in something new is painful. When I rewrite a scene or add something, the changes ripple throughout the novel. The final editing is like crawling over broken glass. My editors must battle me to drag out the full story.

Tell me about a character that did something unexpected or developed differently than you had anticipated in your outline.

Laquatus became very hard to control. When we reached the undersea kingdom, he went into treachery overdrive. Byzantine plots overflowed my computer screen and I wrote long scenes with only Laquatus. I could not rein him in. It took some sharp comments from Jess Lebow (**Magic** book line editor) before I could cut down the mer's screen time. I loosened the ambassador's grip on the frog to free myself, but it took the chaos of Braids to overwhelm the ambassador in the end.

Interview with Scott

Tell me about your style and approach to writing. How do you go from plot to finished novel?

I think my style is kind of moody and wry (or, at least, I keep writing about moody and wry characters). I love rapid dialogue exchanges, and I love writing two characters who have known each other for a long time verbally going at each other (like Skellum and Chainer). I approach writing as if I were verbally telling a story. The story can only go on for as long as I've got the audience's attention. The worst things you can do are (1) let the audience get bored, or (2) let them get ahead of you so they say, "I saw that coming" at your climactic scenes. I like to have several characters in the mix with oddball or extreme personalities, and then turn them loose. This usually guarantees that exciting, unpredictable things will happen, and sometimes these things surprise even me.

The best example of this (and of the journey from plot point to novel) is the opening of *Chainer's Torment*. The outline called for Chainer to find the Mirari and present it to the First. Sounds simple enough, right? When I started writing, I had to stop and think: "How does this low-level apprentice gain an audience with the most important man in the Cabal?" So the plot point evolved into a series of scenes with Chainer having to fight his way past an Order checkpoint (and make contact with Roup), which allowed him to call Skellum, which led to the introduction of Teroh, Baankis, Skellum, Azza, and Deidre. And there was the added bonus of a dementist demonstration, two grendelkins, and some wicked fight scenes (plus several jokes at Roup's and the Order's expense -- one of my favorite exchanges is Skellum asking, "A major is an officer, isn't he?" and Chainer replies, "*This*major is an ass.").

What do you do to help you get through the process?

The most important thing for me is to have designated writing times and designated down times. When I'm at the keyboard, I'm at work, turning my ideas into text that -- if I do it right -- conveys how cool the ideas were in my head. When I'm not at the keyboard, I watch movies and walk the dogs, but most importantly I get most of the good ideas that I will later turn into prose. Sure, I get some big breakthroughs by staring at the computer screen and pondering, but most of the really inspired stuff comes to me when I'm off doing something else. I carry a little notebook around so I can jot ideas down. This notebook was the source of Skellum's hat and tag line, the First's attendants, Chainer's "healing" of Kamahl and Kamahl's negative reaction, Skellum's death and last words, and so on and so on. Someday I'll sell my notebook on eBay and walk away with a cool ten or fifteen bucks.

Tell me about a character that did something unexpected or developed differently than you had anticipated in your outline.

Originally, the character of Deidre was just going to be someone to admit Chainer into the First's manor at the beginning of the book. I wrote something like, "The sentry looked Chainer up and down, then stood aside and said, 'Pass.'" That seemed kind of dull and perfunctory, so I started running some ideas of what the sentry would look like to make her more interesting. As I settled on a tall, muscular woman with sharp nails and teeth and three eyes, I realized she was too cool for a one-line cameo. So, I made her friendly with Azza -- as if they were old friends. Then I made her kindly but intimidating to Chainer to illustrate how Cabalists interact. I added Deidre to the Krosan dragon attack scene so I could explore Chainer's fascination with her, and show her commanding presence, as well as her violent action against the raiders.

As the fight progressed, I realized Deidre wasn't going to survive and that her death might have an effect on Chainer's development (and that the First was watching Chainer develop, with a very nervous Skellum by his side). Frankly, I was shocked how upset *I* was when Deidre died, because I had really grown to like her. But the Cabal is a dangerous place, and the Order forces are not a threat to be taken lightly. Most importantly, though, I wanted to remind the reader and myself what the stakes were (which is echoed later when Skellum is forced into the pits). So Deidre went from an anonymous, almost disposable guard (like a red shirt on *Star Trek*) to a really dynamic, sexy, and effective character with an unfortunately short role.

Interview with Will

Tell me about your style and approach to writing. How do you go from plot to finished novel?

Jess Lebow once told me, "Writing a novel is like making a cross-country trip in your car, but only driving at night so you can never see what's coming until it gets caught in your headlights." I definitely have found some truth in this simile. But I also agree with Vance that the outline is king! Or to extend the simile, the outline is the map you use on your trip so you don't get lost in North Dakota. But, when I take a trip, I like to stray off the highways every once in a while and take a look at some scenic points not shown on the maps. I found the same thing happening when I wrote *Judgment*.

I wrote an extensive, chapter-by-chapter outline for *Judgment* before I started writing, but I periodically had to change the outline because some character decided there was something more important to do before getting on with the plot. After exploring the scenery, I would coax the characters back into the story and then re-write the outline for the next few chapters to compensate. This was how the initial scene in the Balthor's Judgment arena came about. The outline said something like "Kamahl comes home, argues with Balthor and Jeska, and then decides to hold a 'king of the hill' tournament." But, when Kamahl got home, Balthor had other ideas. He's been the barbarian's mentor all his life, and he believed he knew what the "boy" needed -- a ten-mile run and some training in the arena. It wasn't until a couple chapters later that I finally got Kamahl refocused on the tournament, but that training session showed a lot about Balthor and Kamahl, and it set up some interesting moments later on, like when Talon shows up.

What do you do to help you get through the process?

To get through tough patches when I can't write, I watch crime dramas on TV. I actually got addicted to *Law and Order* while writing *Judgment* and caught up on ten years' of episodes all last year. But, you have to push yourself to write sometimes and so, after *Law and Order*, I would sit back down with all the intrigue and character development from the show still in my head and begin writing again.

I also ask myself questions all the time. I hate it when characters (in a show or a book) miss something that's obvious to me. I'm always asking, "Why didn't you use the transporter?" So, as I write, I put myself in the character's place and ask, "What can I do here to fix the situation?" Then, I have the character do it or explain why he or she can't do it. Many of Laquatus's elaborate plots started this way. For example, Laquatus needs to get into the Cabal camp in the Krosan forest. He could just use magic to get there, but the outline calls for him to meet the beast in the woods. Instead of just sending him into the woods without a thought, Laquatus rejects the idea of using magic because he knows that the Cabal (who have no grunts for sentry duty) would have magical protections. Thus it should be easier to slip in from the trees than to use magic and risk setting off a magical alarm.

Tell me about a character that did something unexpected or developed differently than you had anticipated in your outline.

The original outline called for Braids to lead a squad of Cabal troops into the mountains to retrieve the Mirari. After reading the first draft of *Chainer's Torment*, I fell in love with the snake creations that Chainer made and sent to Aphetto, and I realized that the Cabal would use more stealth than just sending in massive troops like the Order, so I decided to send snake assassins along with Braids instead.

And that's all that they were when I began writing the first scenes with Braids and her boys -- snake assassins. Eventually, I knew I needed a name for at least the leader of the snakes, and once I named Leer, he began to exhibit all the traits of a real character. I never intended to name the other snakes, but Leer pretty much demanded they be named and treated like characters as well. Once the snakes became characters, it became possible to care for them. Sure, they were evil and deadly, but someone like Braids could really appreciate those qualities, and she became very attached to her

boys. This worked well for me in the end because I could use Braids' affection for Leer and the boys as a motivating factor for what she did to Balthor.

Stories Beyond Stories

After two years of work, three authors and an editor have turned the ideas that six people created over the course of three days into almost 300,000 words of plot, dialogue, character development and action. But this is only the beginning of this new **Magic: The Gathering** story. Starting this fall, J. Robert King will take the story of Otaria in a new direction that fans can only guess at. And until the origins of the Mirari are uncovered, wild speculation will fly across the Internet.

Will Rob reveal where the Mirari came from by the end of the next trilogy? That I don't know. The only thing that Rob would say about his creative process for writing *Onslaught* was this: "Creation is a dangerous act; one that can maim you. You can come away with a couple of fingers missing." I didn't really want to press him after that. But I can say that you will find out what happens to Kamahl *and* Jeska *and* Seton *and* the First *and* Braids (and others) as new dangers emerge to challenge the continent. Just watch out for a character named Ixidor! And watch your fingers.

If you missed the first two articles in this four-part series, catch up by reading them now!

[Part One: Breaking with Tradition](#)

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