



Matthew Cushing

Author, Editor, Reviewer, Blogger

Newsletter 015, 2025Q1

Site: www.matthewcushing.com

Bluesky: [@mcushing.bksy.social](https://bsky.app/profile/mcushing.bksy.social)

Welcome to my first newsletter for 2025! The year is off like a bad New Year's hangover: a constant combination of disbelief and disgust that turns my stomach and makes me want to stay in bed until the whole thing is over. But I can't—I have stories to write!

Speculative fiction is actually a great release for turbulent times such as we're experiencing now as our country tries to decide who we are and what we stand for. Horror stories (other than the nightly news) help show us how much worse things could be; fantasy lets us escape into worlds of magic and dragons; and science fiction can help us understand what is going on.

Many science fiction authors, from Orwell to Huxley, Atwood to Asimov, wrote about societies gone wrong and why. In fact, maybe I'll put a piece together on this for next quarter. It's fascinating how prescient many of them were.

But, in the meantime, I've got some new blog posts to share, some books to recommend, and a writing selection to present. And as usual, there's a bit of writing humor at the end.

Please enjoy!

Featured Article



Characters Need Flaws (Usually)

There has been an ongoing debate within my online critique group about whether every character in every story needs a flaw. "Characters should have flaws" is one of those tenets of good writing that seems to be espoused everywhere.

But is it true? Yes and no. Let me explain.

Story Drivers

Though stories can cover endless topics, there are really only two "drivers" of a story, i.e. what propels the story from beginning to end. Characters and plots. And while every story has both, only a few stories manage to effectively utilize both. It is generally one or the other that drives everything.

Plot-driven stories, were they made into movies, would be action flicks. High-adrenaline situations where characters are reactive, fighting for their lives before finally getting out of danger. As books, these stories are harder to pull off, and the main criticism of them is that they are one-dimensional. There's no depth under the main situation such that, if the action slowed down, anything interesting would happen. But still, they can be fun reading in an afternoon at the beach.

Character-driven stories are much more complex by the simple fact that humans are amazingly complex. And humans are more relatable. Situations about love, anxiety, appreciation, betrayal, and so many others resonate with readers because they understand—if they haven't experienced directly—these emotions.

And that's where character flaws come in. Great characters are deep, complex, and have emotions. They are not perfect, but have biases, histories, or conditions that affect their decision-making and their actions. Just as we all do.

Continue reading at: <https://www.matthewcushing.com/post/characters-need-flaws-usually>

Latest Blog Posts



Under Whom Would You Serve?

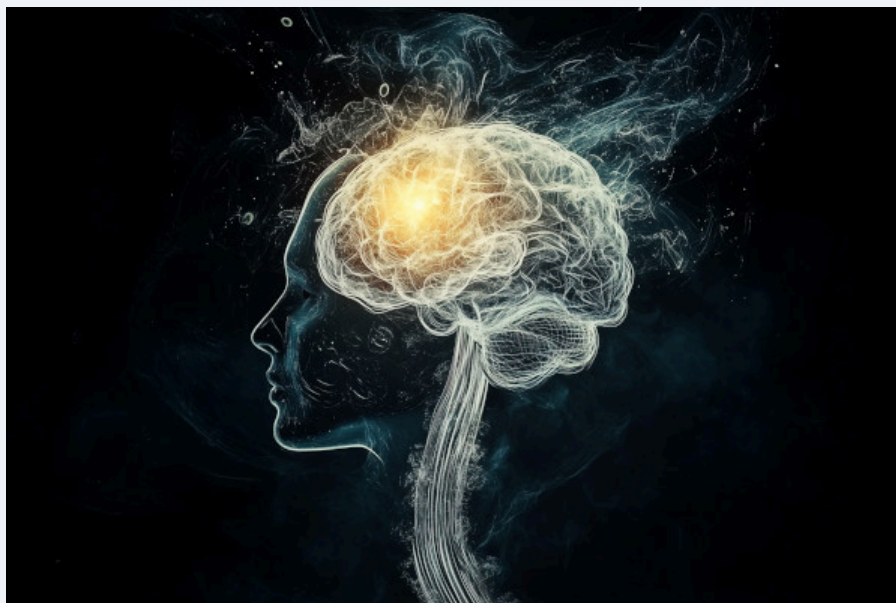
We've all imagined it: living in a futuristic science fiction universe. Replicators. Holodecks. Phasers. And that's just from Star Trek. Other universes bring light sabers, subspace travel, androids, and aliens. Oh so many aliens! And, we wouldn't want to be stuck on some random planet. No! We want to live on a ship and travel from place to place. And hide behind the big guns and shields when necessary.

But in many of these universes, the ships are run by the political entities that can afford to build them. Starfleet. The Colonies. Earthforce. While in others, crews scramble to find what's left over, or they steal their ships.

So, which would you rather serve on? A large ship-of-the-line that is the toughest 800-pound gorilla in a firefight? To walk those decks, you've got to enlist and follow the chain of command, like it or not. Or, would you prefer a small, my-crew-is-my-family vessel, where running out of gas or being caught by the authorities is a constant threat. But you can go where you want when you want?

And, depending on your choice, under what type of captain would you want to serve?

See which captains I rate highest: <https://www.matthewcushing.com/post/under-whom-would-you-serve>



Identify Solutions Not Problems

While in the early stages of my consulting career—well before I decided to focus on writing—I had had a client with an underperforming area that I brought to the attention of my manager. Instead of heaping praise on me for what I found, he offered some constructive feedback that I'd only done half my job.

“Bring me solutions, not problems,” he said, before explaining that identifying that something is broken and needs fixing (or improving) is the easy step. The harder part is actually providing a solution, a way forward. Particularly as a consultant, most clients know they have issues. That's why the consultants are there in the first place. So, to go to the client and tell them “Process X is broken” is not really helpful. They probably already know that.

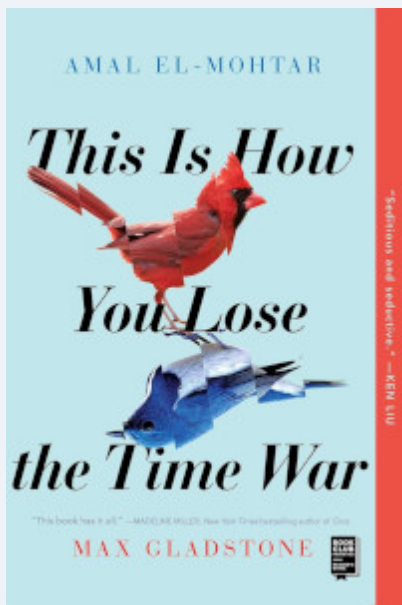
But, if you go to the client and say, “If we do these three things, we can fix Process X.” Now, you've given the client new information and something to consider. They may tweak it, they may implement it, or they may do something different, but the key is that new information has been provided.

I have taken this approach on in most aspects of my life. Instead of just pointing out an issue, I usually try to think of a couple of ways to address it, or at least have an idea of *how* to come up with a solution.

Read how I apply this tenet to critiquing at: <https://www.matthewcushing.com/post/identify-solutions-not-problems>

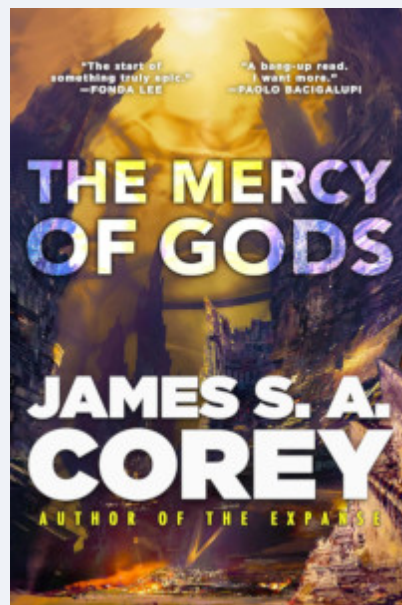
Book Recommendations

Read reviews for these titles and others on my website at:
<https://www.matthewcushing.com/blog/categories/review>



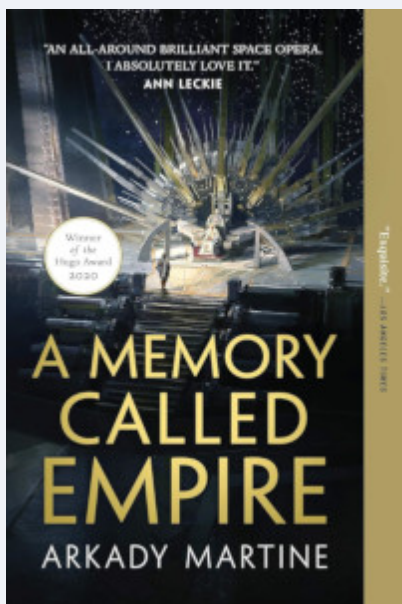
This Is How You Lose the Time War
by Amal El-Mohtar & Max Gladstone

An elegant and mind-bending story about operatives from opposing factions who chase each other through time and fall in love. Or do they?



The Mercy of Gods
by James SA Corey

The opening salvo of a new series from author James SA Corey (The Expanse) who examine a world being conquered from the viewpoint of those who fall.



A Memory Called Empire
by Arkady Martine

The Hugo-winning first book of Martine's Teixcalaanli series. Filled with amazing world-building and galactic political intrigue, a new ambassador must find her way.



Onyx Storm
by Rebecca Yarros

The third book in Yarros' ongoing Emphyrean series about young dragon riders, dark magic, first love, ancient prophecies, and mythical dragons.

Writing Excerpt - *Blueberry Concrete*

This is the opening scene of a short story written for the theme "parallel worlds."

Ever smelled another universe?
I have.

A scent partly sweet yet caustic, charged with energy, and leaving just a hint of ash. Like a cross of blueberry concrete with electric toast. The smell is hard to describe, but if you ever encounter it, you'd know what I mean.

The first time I smelled it was on a Sunday night. It was late in the fourth quarter, and I was wondering whether my beloved Broncos were going to make a comeback or piss away an opportunity to win and make the playoffs.

With only the TV on, the room danced in whatever color engulfed the screen, flickering between shadow and light with the action. That's when I first smelled it but had no idea the origin. I checked the mostly-eaten bag of Doritos sitting on my chest, then under the blanket draped across my legs. It seemed to be coming from behind me, from behind the couch.

But that was up against the wall.

"Quick, take the reading," a woman's voice said.

I froze.

There was no sciency commercial on the TV. Maybe another channel was bleeding through the feed? I muted the TV.

"That's it! That's the one!" another, nasally male voice said.

A green glow pulsed in the background shadows beyond the light of the TV. I tossed the Doritos to the side and turned to look down the back of the couch.

Pop!

Like finger snapped out of a cheek at one hundred decibels, the green glow and voices vanished. There was nothing behind the couch, other than the wall to my bedroom. And the smell. That indescribable smell.

Writing Humor

Quirks of English:

The fact that some people can't distinguish
between etymology and entomology
bugs me in ways I can't put into words.

The adjective form of metal is metallic
but not for iron, which is ironic.

Thanks for Reading

A heartfelt **Thank You** to everyone who has subscribed to this newsletter. Your support of my writing is both invaluable and motivating. If you want more up-to-date information on what I'm doing--from what I'm reading to what I'm working on--please visit my website at www.matthewcushing.com. Or, you can follow me on Threads at [@mhcushing](https://www.threads.net/@mhcushing) or Bluesky at [@mcushing.bksy.social](https://bsky.app/profile/mcushing.bksy.social).

If you know anyone who loves speculative fiction (science fiction, fantasy, horror, time travel, dystopian, utopian, steampunk, solarpunk, climate fiction, space opera, urban fantasy, supernatural, etc.), please forward them a copy of this newsletter and encourage them to sign up!

Klaatu Barada Nikto, Live Long and Prosper, and Nanoo Nanoo!

Matthew Cushing

Copyright (c) 2021-2025 Matthew Cushing. All Rights Reserved.

This email was sent to {{contact.EMAIL}}

You've received it because you've subscribed to my newsletter.

[Unsubscribe](#)

