

# ◆ BEYOND HIGHFIRE ◆

For years I've wanted to do a dragon book, but I held off because I simply couldn't come up with a new way into a dragon story. *Highfire* is actually my third attempt at writing a fire-lizard novel, but it's the first time I was actually able to get all the way through to those blessed words: The End.

My first two efforts were ok, I suppose, they would have told perfectly fine dragon stories, but both felt over-familiar as though someone had already written something along similar lines that was more than likely far better than what I was writing. There have been so many amazing books written about noble fire breathers that I couldn't see the point in raking over those coals. There was no point in even trying to out-Tolkien JRR Tolkien or supersede Christopher Paolini.

Dragon books could be labeled genre fiction, and I love genre fiction. In fact, most of my favorite books are genre: *True Grit*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, *The Princess Bride*, *Lord of the Rings*, *The Graveyard Book*, *Gentlemen of the Road*, *Planet of the Apes*, *Marathon Man*, *The Talented Mister Ripley*, and a thousand others. All genre. All amazing literature, and lofty company for any writer to aspire to. Still, I was determined to produce something that might get my dragon scrabbling around the bottom rung of any chart featuring those wonderful books.

So, shaking up the genre, I decided, was the way in. I've used this technique before with some success. In *Artemis Fowl*, for example, I promoted the criminal mastermind character to leading man, leading boy in fact. Another example of this technique is *Airman*, where the superhero's power was his inquiring mind rather than the power gifted him by a government experiment. And with *Plugged* the wise-cracking investigator searches the back alleys of New Jersey for a missing doctor, not to fulfill his contract with some mysterious beauty but to finish off his hair transplant.

Now I am not deluded enough to believe for a moment that my genre twists are unique or even fresh, but they are unique and fresh to me and that's the important thing when you're stuck in a small room for a year. If I'm working on something that feels a little different then that newness is enough to keep both my own, and hopefully the venerable reader's, boredom at bay. Even if the newness is only new to me.

That decision being made, I set about creating a different kind of dragon. The first thing I did was to write down a list of widely accepted fire lizard characteristics. Dragons were large creatures, usually aloof, primal killers, immensely powerful, often magical, certainly not figures of fun, and the planet's apex predators that never hid their glory from mankind. My dragon would have to retain some of those characteristics, but he would also need to be essentially different.

I thought I would take a couple months to let the idea ferment in my subconscious, but as it turned out my subconscious was way ahead of me and within a few hours a character popped into my head almost fully formed. I even had his name:

Vern.

Vern the Dragon.

Sucking on a cigar, wearing cargo shorts and a *Flashdance* T-shirt.

Often, I discard the first half a dozen names I come up with but in this case, I knew I had nailed this guy first time out. Vern was about as far as I could get from Smaug or Rhaegal.

I needed to have a talk with my subconscious and find out what was going on down there. Why Vern? Why *Flashdance*? The answers came quickly.

Vern could be short for Wyvern, which was a class of dragon; little guys who were definitely not in the big leagues. So, I had myself a miniature dragon with a chip on his shoulder.

And *Flashdance*? Don't ask me where that came from. I suppose if you had to pick the most unexpected T-shirt for a dragon to be seen wearing, *Flashdance* would probably be in the top ten. *Xanadu* would have worked too maybe, or *Highlander: The Quickening*.

It's a funny thing but usually I develop a character's personality first and then pile his outfits and so forth on top of that, but in this instance the look of the character arrived first and informed his disposition. This was another development in the Vern saga that I found interesting and helped me maintain my own fun levels while writing the book.







So now I had a character that I knew certain things about: Vern was smaller than the average dragon, liked 80s movies, and was the last of his kind. In order to indulge his love for human culture and vodka then he must live somewhere close to humanity but remote enough so that he could remain hidden, and so my search began for such a place.

It occurred to me that Vern could be mistaken for one of the mythical creatures that are regularly spotted by hikers, and I considered situating him near Loch Ness or Bigfoot ground zero, the Pacific Northwest, but then I read an article about Louisiana's Honey Island Swamp monster that, legend has it, was the result of congress between an escaped gorilla from the zoo train and an alligator, and I knew I had my setting. It seemed to me that Vern would be mightily annoyed by the idea that people would think he was some kind of hybrid ape-lizard, and it also occurred to me that if Vern had a familiar of sorts then that familiar would find this case of mistaken identity absolutely hilarious. Also a familiar would definitely be needed to set up Vern's cable and deliver gas for his generator.

And so now I had a second character and the potential chink in Vern's armour. I decided to make this familiar a local boy by the name of Everett Moreau known by one and all as Squib because of an unfortunate de-digitizing accident with a stick of dynamite.

Once I dropped these two characters into the dank, gray-green Honey Island Swamp water their impact ripples to colorize the entire world. Squib would need a mother and a best friend. Vern would need a confidante who had been with him for decades. We would need a protagonist who possibly had affiliations with a crime gang in New Orleans. With every new character came weeks of research as I strove to stay true to the feel of Louisiana. Luckily one of the editors who worked on *Highfire* actually grew up in Louisiana and was able to stamp out any weeds of inauthenticity before she could sprawl throughout the book.

After maybe six months of turning my pieces face-up as it were, it was time to assemble the jigsaw puzzle. For me this is always the toughest part of writing a book: linking ideas together. People often say that all you need to write a book is one good idea, but that has never been my experience. You need dozens of good ideas and the patience to know which ones are good enough to make the final cut. I usually get that part about 70 percent right and then my editor will do some surgery and bring the manuscript over the line.

So, if you're thinking of reading *Highfire* I really hope you can forget all about everything I just told you and enjoy the book for what I want it to be: a genre-bending fantasy-comedy adventure noir buddy-buddy procedural with a love story thrown in. It's like electricity; I don't know how it works, but I like it when it works right.

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