

Welcome to the Pitch Wars wishlist of Ian Barnes. This year **I'm mentoring Adult Fantasy**. If you're not writing something with swords, magic, or emotionally crippled deities who just want someone to please take the (admittedly shoddily built) magical laser-axe they crafted and go save the annual Imperial Bake-Off from soggy crumb cakes, sorry, your mentor is in another castle. (Why do gods care about subpar baked goods? I don't know, it's your story. Jeez.) If you're here, you have excellent taste in randomly clicking on blog hop names. Unless you sought me out on purpose, in which case:

Welcome.

Quick aside: **I am accepting New Adult Fantasy**. Keep in mind that—outside of romance or contemporary fiction—NA typically doesn't have shelf space and thus isn't A Thing in SFF. So if chosen, I'll advise you to axe the New and simply call it Adult.

Moving on!

For the uninitiated, Pitch Wars is a mentorship program where an experienced writer helps an unagented writer edit and refine their manuscript. Think of it like an in-depth, one-sided critique partner relationship. Pitch Wars is ... intense. Full of friendship forming and lesson learning. Like an 80's movie montage sequence but with less synth music and more angst. The ideal mentee is someone willing to take full advantage of this opportunity, because, if you let it, it'll change your life.

Before going any further: **WARNING!** This post contains swearing, bad jokes, dumb gifs, and possibly butts. Often combined. **So, maybe NSFW.**

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Still here?

Fuck yeah!

Who Is This Joker?

I'm a computer engineer-turned-technical writer, and a lover of all things fantasy, sarcasm, and video game-related. Bonus points if they're combined. I write urban and epic fantasy, and dabble in cyberpunk. Again, often combined. I'm a two-time former mentee, first in 2016

working with JC Nelson on a cyberpunk-fantasy mashup, then again in 2017 with Michelle Hauck and Carrie Callaghan on an epic fantasy. I mentored in 2018, 2019, and am clearly back again this year because my free time has terrible survival instincts. My superpower is the ability to derail any conversation and dive into a sea of nonsense at the drop of a hat (as anyone who spends more than two minutes talking with me can attest). I'm represented by Matt Bialer of Sanford J Greenburger Associates.

The Wishlist (AKA, The Real Reason You're Here)

Give me the three F's: fun, fantastical, and fucking rad.

Something clever and quirky with amazing worldbuilding, a plot that keeps me flipping pages ever faster, and nerve-wracking stakes for characters I care about. That's what I'm after, and it's what I'll kick ass mentoring. Just make sure you crack a joke every now and then.

Now, the caveat here is plot and characters must take center stage, not the humor. That's its own genre (one I'm not after). Jokes should enhance the plot, not be the plot. An engaging story comes first.

Above all else: I love complex, broken characters. Give me assholes trying their best. Characters doing the wrong thing for the right reasons, or the right thing for the wrong reasons.

Unlike previous years, **I'm not taking Science Fiction**. Good news is there's plenty of other shiny mentors waiting to inject your space-y words directly into their frontal lobes, so, go blow up one of their planets or something. (Note: The exception here is Sci-Fantasy, which I'll cover later and is really its own separate fantasy subgenre anyway.)

For specific tropes, I've a weakness for stories with not-so-imaginary friends, unreliable narrators, unrelenting sarcasm, the Rule of Cool, necromancy, airships, dinosaurs, heists, complicated-and-rigid magic systems, getting the band back together/assembling the team, intense friendships, ridiculous pop culture references, and anything involving some lost, ancient civilization (bonus points if it was an advanced civ that vanished mysteriously). Antiheroes and villain protagonists are my kryptonite, especially villain redemption tales (think Zuko, Catra, or the MCU Loki). Stories dealing with religions (preferably fictitious ones, a la most anything Brandon Sanderson writes) or flawed deities are also surefire attention-grabbers. JRPGs were a foundational part of my childhood and remain a favorite, so if you've got a ragtag group of miscreants off on a quest to kick their god in the balls for fucking the world up, I'd be all over that.

In general, the crazier your story becomes as it goes on, the more wildly it spins off the rails, the more likely I am to dig it. So long as it remains within swatting distance of 'makes sense within the confines of the world.' There's nonsense, and then there's WTFuckery.

Structure-wise, if you've got frame story shenanigans going on, high-five! Relevant prologues and epilogues (key word being relevant)? Gimme. Third-person present tense? Hell yeah! I know some find it awkward, but I think it's engaging. Also a fan of any flavor of first-

person, well-executed second, and the always reliable third-past. However, **I like my third to be of a more limited nature** (ie. narration tied to the POV characters) rather than the omniscient sort.

On to the fantasy subgenres and the Wants and Don't Wants!

Epic/Second World

I love epic fantasy. I love reading it, I love writing it, I love trying to project my consciousness out into the void to merge with the concept of it on a spiritual level and ascend to a higher plane of existence populated by sassy dragons, jittery elves, drunk gods, and mage-ennoi. So ... yeah. Gimme all that epic nonsense.

Note: I categorize 'epic' as anything second world, regardless of the stakes. By and large, it's a catch-all for anything not set on Earth. One could argue most subgenres fall under epic's umbrella, but then I wouldn't get to ramble on about other genres in this wishlist, so One can scamper right the fuck off.

Urban/Contemporary

Urban fantasy will always hold a special place in my heart. The Dresden Files! American Gods! Stranger Things! Hellboy! Supernatural! I love it all, and will happily read/watch any I can get my hands.

Give me your flawed assholes just trying to make it through one last shift at the diner as that overly flirty elf hits on them. Give me your sorcerers desperately trying to pass their US history exams while holding down a part-time job at the county morgue that is literally just holding down dead-but-not-quite bodies as the affable yet world-weary coroner tries to figure out which necromantic mob boss did the deed this time. Give me the pyrokinetic firefighter. The tax attorney who sees between the decimals to the squirming horrors beneath the veil of the world. The astronaut whose rocket is powered by a demonic pact. The bank teller constantly being pranked by some extraordinarily petty ghost.

Basically, the more unique the better, and the weirder the better.

Sci-Fantasy

Sci-Fantasy is my not-so-secret obsession. I would absolutely love to find a solid one this year. For those unfamiliar with the term, it's exactly what it looks like: anything combining science fiction and fantasy. Think Tamsyn Muir's The Locked Tomb series, Star Wars (Jedi are space wizards, and I'll roll my eyes forever at anyone who claims otherwise), Into The Badlands, Shadowrun, or Final Fantasy VII. Basically, some fun, interesting combination of advanced technology and magic at the core of your setting. Space dragons! Mecha-mages! Faster-than-light travel that relies upon hooking the corpse of a dead demigod up to the engine and watching it do the Electric Slide!

Superhero

Gimme. I love all things superheroic, and desperately want more in literary form. I'd prefer it lean more Doom Patrol than Justice League, but I'll gladly take whatever you want to fling at me.

Steampunk

Remember how I mentioned airships as a trope? This (and Sci-Fantasy) are where that comes in. Steampunk (not to be confused with a steamy romance set during the rise of punk rock in the 70's) is yet another thing I'd love to see more of. Particularly if it blends the steampunk aesthetic with magic (think the Dishonored games or Brandon Sanderson's second Mistborn series).

The Grab Bag

Those five genres above are broad, but hardly exhaustive. There are many, many more subgenres of fantasy. Dark, Portal, Gaslamp, Weird West, Military, Hopepunk, etc. The list goes on. As long as what you wrote can slot broadly into one of the above (and again, epic/second world is a pretty massive catch-all), don't sweat the genre tag.

Minus a few caveats...

The Don't Wants

– Low Fantasy: I generally prefer my fantasy have an element of magic in it, even if in a minor capacity.

– Historical: I'm not your guy for historical fantasy, especially if it leans heavily into the history element. **This does not include second world fantasy inspired by historical eras.** Think the difference between Jonathon Strange & Mr Norrell (meh) vs Carnival Row (hell yeah).

– Literary: Not my mug of whiskey, and I don't read enough of it to feel comfortable mentoring it.

– Magical Realism: Same as literary. I'm simply not well-versed enough.

– Romance: I'm not a romance writer. If your fantasy plot is primarily a 'will they, won't they' scenario, sending to me is a recipe for heartbreak.

Absolutely give me stories with relationships and romance, makin' out and fightin' and make-out-fightin'. I want another John and Aeryn to root for! Another Sara and Ava! Alucard and Rhy! Got a story with two wizards who desperately want to smooch but can't because their union will destroy the world? That's the good shit right there. As with humor, romance simply shouldn't be the driving force of the plot.

– Horror: I enjoy dark fantasy and fantasy with horrific elements (Dark Souls, Gideon the Ninth, The Witcher, etc), but straight up horror isn't my jam. For clarity's sake, I define horror as something written with the primary intent being scaring/unsettling the reader, rather than said spookiness being a byproduct.

AND NOW FOR THE FINE PRINT

– You need to pass something along the lines of the Mako Mori or Bechdel Tests to not make me roll my eyes into another dimension.

– I'd love to see books from writers with diverse backgrounds. Give me stories that reflect the breadth and variety of cultures and people I see around me every day, not whitewashed, anglocentric setting #457145.

– Not a fan of gore for gore's sake (particularly body horror). Some is fine, but don't send me something where your POV character has their arm lopped off and surgically reattached to their forehead, after which they spend ten pages internally screaming about suddenly being able to see through their index finger.

– Please no explicit sex scenes on page one (or erotica in general). You need to ease a fella into that stuff (or, ideally, go with my personal favorite: ye olde "fade to black"). At least give me some character development or a stiff drink first.

– Word Count: Pitch Wars is, unfortunately, limited by time constraints. You've got—*checks notes, blinks*—three months to revise your manuscript. That may seem like a long time, but it isn't. If you lob a 200k book at my head, well, first I'm gonna duck because ow, but then I'm likely to pass simply because there's not time to tackle a beast that size. **150k is roughly the top end of manageable.**

All this said, in case I haven't made it clear enough, I'll consider almost anything appropriately glib and fun with a fantastical bent.

Give me the worldbuilding of Sanderson, the humor of Butcher, and the prose of Schwab, all wrapped up in a page-turning plot with characters I can root for from start to finish. I'll help that story shine with the face-melting force of the Ark of the Covenant. Have you written something like that?

Some Favorite Stories Across Mediums (ie. Here, Let Me Help You Out With Comp Titles I Love):

Books

The Dresden Files series by Jim Butcher, Harrow the Ninth by Tamsyn Muir, Good Omens by Neil Gaiman/Terry Pratchett, American Gods by Neil Gaiman, Warbreaker by Brandon Sanderson, The Lies of Locke Lamora by Scott Lynch, Vicious by VE Schwab (or, honestly, anything she writes), The Prey of Gods by Nicky Drayden, The Name of the Wind by Patrick

Rothfuss, Red Rising by Pierce Brown, The Nightside series by Simon R Green, Hellboy/BPRD by Mike Mignola, The Fifth Season by NK Jemisin, Running with the Demon by Terry Brooks, Feed by Mira Grant, Heroine Complex by Sarah Kuhn, Kings of the Wyld by Nicholas Eames, We Could Be Heroes by Mike Chen

Movies

The Dark Knight, Into the Spider-Verse, The Last Jedi, Thor: Ragnarok, Black Panther, Guardians of the Galaxy, Stardust, Deadpool, Captain Marvel, Wonder Woman (Did I mention I dig superheroes yet?)

TV

Doom Patrol, Angel, Farscape, Pushing Daisies, Killjoys, Supernatural, Jessica Jones, Stranger Things, The Good Place, The Mandalorian, My Hero Academia, RWBY, The Venture Bros, Critical Role, Into The Badlands, Harley Quinn, Legends of Tomorrow, The Umbrella Academy

Games

Final Fantasy VI (the best one, and I'll fight anyone who claims otherwise), Final Fantasy VII Remake (I might have to fight myself), Chrono Trigger, Mass Effect 2, Baldur's Gate II, Dragon Age II, Alan Wake, Dark Souls, Dishonored, Xenoblade Chronicles, Horizon: Zero Dawn, Persona 5 Royal, God of War 2018, Fire Emblem: Three Houses, The Last of Us Part II

Why You Should Choose Me

Because I'm awesome. Wait, that's not a good reason? Fine.

My day job is as a technical writer/editor, and I've worked with everything from ad copy, to newspapers, to making sense of legalese nonsense. Which is to say, my editor-brain is always on and I know how to untangle thorny word-knots.

For the less everyday bland and more pertinently fantastical: I know the ins and outs of fantasy. I'm amazing at worldbuilding, character backstories and dialogue, big picture plot, action scenes, and zooming in on pacing issues. Also got a keen eye for the line-by-line (sentence flow, readability, nitpicky line edits, etc). I can easily see when your characters aren't behaving the way they should, and when you've gone soft and really need to make them suffer more. Suffering builds character!

My communication preferences are flexible. In the past, I've interacted with mentees solely via email or Twitter DM, and others have been text messages and hours-long phone calls where we hash out edits. Both the amount and style of communication are solely up to the mentee's comfort and preference. On my end, I work from home (particularly with 2020 doing 2020 things) and thus am largely available whenever (as my constant fooling around on Twitter no doubt attests.)

When it comes to pointing out and fixing problems, I'll never say "You must do X" but will offer in-depth analysis for why it might be a pretty good idea. I also don't expect a mentee to take every suggestion as the written-in-stone, be-all-end-all truth. If you think I'm full of shit because I suggest killing off your protagonist's beloved differential equations professor via dinosaur-riding wizard-ninjas, that's cool. Maybe their presence is a fundamental block that shapes the character's emotional arc and I somehow missed it. I'm not omniscient (yet), I miss things (occasionally). As long as you've got solid reasons for pushing back against ideas, I'm happy.

End of the day, it's your book. I'm just here to help make it as shiny and chrome as possible. Plus, this entire thing is likely to involve lots of gifs and pictures of my cats, both of dubious motivational quality.

Double-plus, I'm a two-time former PW mentee with three previous mentors. If you do the math, that's four mentors worth of wisdom for the price of one! You'd be a fool to pass that up. A FOOL! That, and it means I've been in your shoes and know with excruciating clarity how tough this whole process can be.

Triple-plus, I'm fun. That'll make all the darling-killing and angst-revising (slightly) more bearable. Maybe.

Wait, I can't say that's a good reason either?

Anyway! I'm sure I've forgotten something on the list or haven't clarified well enough, but I'd be more than happy to answer any questions you have. Best way to reach me is via Twitter at @imbarnes or simply commenting on this post.

Good luck in the weeks to come!