

Welcome to the Pitch Wars 2021 wishlist of Ian Barnes. This year I'm mentoring **Adult Fantasy, Sci-Fantasy, and select Science-Fiction**. If you're not writing something with magic, space guns, or space guns powered by particularly irate dimension-hopping archfey who are absolutely Too Old For This Shit, then sorry, your mentor is in another castle. 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: Hey.

Quick aside: **I am accepting New Adult SFF**. 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 likely 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. I wrote a [slightly more detailed blog post about Pitch Wars](#) and what to expect from it my first year mentoring in 2018, which you can peruse if interested.

Before going further: **WARNING!** This post contains swearing, bad jokes, dumb gifs, and other gratuitous acts of violence against the English language. Often combined. **So, maybe NSFW.**

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Still here?

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, 2020, 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.

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 culture 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. Comping/inspired by some anime or video game? Hit me with that good shit. 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. Basically, if you've ever played D&D and had the campaign go *hilariously* wrong, that's the kind of story I love best.

In general, the crazier your story becomes, the more wildly it spins off the rails for your characters, 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 subgenres and the Wants and Don't Wants!

Epic/Second World Fantasy

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 ennui-filled dragons, jittery elves, drunk gods, and general magical shenanigans. So ... yeah. Gimme all that epic nonsense.

Note: I categorize 'epic' as anything second world, regardless of the stakes. This is also often referred to as high fantasy. 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.

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. Hard-light shields designed to withstand a level nine fireball! Mages piloting fifty-foot battle mechs via spellcraft! A public sewer system reliant on appeasing the primordial water elemental living beneath the city!

Urban/Contemporary Fantasy

Urban fantasy will always hold a special place in my heart. *The Dresden Files!* *October Daye!* *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 the day without their boss summoning that eldritch horror into HR, again. Give me your alchemists trying to perfect the philosopher's stone while holding down a bartending gig and *why do the elves keep ordering drinks that make them puke that much?* Give me the pyrokinetic firefighter. The diplomat brokering peace between the mundane and magical while their marriage is on the rocks. The astronaut whose rocket is powered by a demonic pact. The struggling musician constantly pranked by some extraordinarily petty ghost.

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

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.

The -Punk Genres

Steampunk! Cyberpunk! Hopepunk! Dungeonpunk! Cottagepunk! Bardpunk! Gardenpunk! Really, anything -punk related is something I'd be interested in (within the context of SFF, of course). Emphasis on the -punk aspect of the story, rather than the prefix. By which I mean *an underdog or outsider fighting against The System*. Alas, these days when you say steam or cyberpunk, it evokes a specific setting rather than a tone. Settings which I adore—and will happily read if your story doesn't fit the punk theme—but I'm especially looking for stories with that tone.

Space Opera

I didn't accept space opera last year and I missed it. *Profoundly*. (Especially those with a sci-fantasy bent, but again, sci-fantasy should be its own, more widely used genre and I will continue screaming about it until it happens BUT THIS IS BESIDE THE POINT AND OH HO YOU WANT TO KNOW ABOUT THE SINGING AND THE SPACESHIPS AND THE FOUND FAMILY OF MISFIT ASSHOLES SAVING THE UNIVERSE andnowIwantaGuardiansoftheGalaxymusical...)

cough

So, yeah. Space opera! I dig it. Again, I lean more towards the Killjoys, Guardians of the Galaxy, or Farscape side of the operatic space nonsense line. Something zippy and laden with quips, all concealing a heart of gold. That said, I also love those space operas with a sense of wonder and mystery. Remember that trope of the ancient, lost civilization? Yeah, I *adore* that in my sci-fi. (Bonus points when undercut with a creeping sense of alien dread.)

The Grab Bag

Those six genres above are broad, but hardly exhaustive. There are many, *many* more subgenres of fantasy. Dark, Portal, Gaslamp, Weird West, Military, Gothic, New Weird, 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 anything, 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).

– Hard Sci-Fi: If your plot (or even just the page-by-page prose) relies heavily on true-to-life scientific knowledge or jargon, I'm not the right mentor for your book. The sole exclusion to this rule is cyberpunk or computer/gaming-related jargon, as, hey, computer engineering background.

– 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 SFF 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, The Book of Accidents, etc), but straight up contemporary 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 and/or reflecting the writers' own lived experiences (such as culture, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability, neurodiversity, etc). Give me stories showcasing the breadth and variety of people I see around me every day, not whitewashed, anglocentric setting #457146.

– 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 or recite poetry via their urethra.

– 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? Gimme.

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 City We Became by NK Jemisin, Running with the Demon by Terry Brooks, Feed by Mira Grant, Heroine Complex by Sarah Kuhn, Bloody Rose 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, Loki, WandaVision, 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, Hades

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 SFF. 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 and thus am largely available whenever (as my constant fooling around on Twitter no doubt attests). I will admit to a *slight* bias towards real-time communication of some variety, as that has traditionally produced the best brainstorming and problem-solving sessions for me, but again, flexible!

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.

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](https://twitter.com/imbarnes) or simply commenting on this post.

Good luck in the weeks to come!