

Elements of Writing a Paranormal Novel

by Steven Harper

The most common question writers hear is, “Where do you get your ideas?” Some authors keep a pithy or smart-alecky answer ready, such as, “I belong to the Idea of the Month Club” or “I store a trunk of them in my attic.” More honest authors might answer, “I look at my bank account. It’s amazing how many ideas a line of zeroes can generate.”

A more useful answer is that you simply keep your eyes open. Fantasy author Mercedes Lackey once saw a small animal skitter across the road in front of her car. A split-second later, she realized her eyes were playing tricks—it was nothing but a piece of paper blown by the wind. Most people would think nothing of this and continue on their way, but Lackey is a writer. She played with the incident in her mind, asking herself why an animal might disguise itself as a piece of paper and what might happen if someone found such an animal. Eventually she wrote a story about it.

The easiest way to find ideas is to play the “What If?” game. What if that piece of paper really were an animal? What if time ran backward when I turned my watch backward? What if a vampire needed to travel quickly from New York to Los Angeles? Could he send himself by FedEx?

Another way to get novel-length ideas is to take two unrelated concepts and smooch them together. If one of those elements is supernatural, you have a paranormal book. Neil Gaiman took the all-too-common idea of an abandoned child needing a family and combined it with the concept of supernatural creatures inhabiting a cemetery. Out of this, he got *The Graveyard Book*. Bram Stoker combined vampires with (then) modern-day London and got *Dracula*. Naomi Novik tossed dragons into the *Napoleonic Wars* and got *His Majesty’s Dragon*. Who would ever have thought of that?

A writer who kept her eyes and mind open, that’s who.

It’s great fun to take an ordinary situation and inject a supernatural element. That’s what a paranormal book is all about. So let’s examine how to use some supernatural elements.

Supernatural Elements

You can't simply drop a bit of magic into your book and expect to claim the whole thing is supernatural. In order to qualify as a true paranormal book, your novel must contain at least one supernatural element without which the entire story would fall apart. The paranormal must be integral to the story. There is simply no way, for example, to remove the dragons from *His Majesty's Dragon* and preserve the book. Laurell K. Hamilton can't take vampires and werewolves out of her Anita Blake novels and replace them with ordinary people. The books simply wouldn't work. If you can replace your main character's broomstick with a fast car and her crystal ball with a cell phone and get away with it, you don't really have a paranormal book—you have a book with supernatural decorations.

Some books pretend to be paranormal but aren't. All the supernatural elements in Katherine Paterson's *Bridge to Terabithia* appear nowhere except in Jess and Leslie's imaginations. Edward Eager's *Magic or Not?* and its sequel *The Well-Wishers* use a well that may or may not actually be granting wishes. Peg Kerr uses parallel retellings of the folktale "The Wild Swans"—one modern, one fantasy historical—in her wonderful novel of the same title, and leaves the reader wondering if her two stories are truly connected. Some readers appreciate the magical realism and others feel cheated by it, so tread carefully if you want to go this route.

An idea for a supernatural element can hit you out of nowhere. You might be walking the dog or shopping for groceries when you realize that a magic trunk filled with an infinite number of costumes from bygone eras would make a great basis for a novel. Or, more likely, you'll be doing some reading on supernatural subjects and something will catch your eye. I always maintain that learning something new is a great way to generate story ideas.

Supernatural elements tend to fall into certain categories. This is by no means a complete list, but it's pretty good. Pick one and run with it.

The Supernatural Object

This is a widget with magical powers. The classic example here is the magic sword. Excalibur springs to mind. Stories abound with people who find, inherit, receive, or even create magic rings, magic carpets, magic books, magic brooms, magic cauldrons—the list goes on. Look around your house. Any object can be made magical.

You might discover supernatural objects for your book by simply looking at the world around you and wondering what it might be like if a particular object had supernatural powers. Or an idea for an object might simply hit you over the head and demand to be used. In any case, you

have to keep your eyes and mind open to receive the idea.

Supernatural objects tends to fall into two categories:

THE OBVIOUS OBJECT

The Obvious Object's supernatural power is related to its normal function. A doll is fun to play with, but when it comes to life, it's even more fun. A motorcycle provides quick transportation, but a flying motorcycle will take you to the ends of the earth. A book contains interesting information, but a witch's book lets you cast spells.

A setting that uses a lot of casual magic might have any number of little Obvious Objects lying around. They add color to the background. J.K. Rowling makes extensive use of these in her Harry Potter books. Photographs and portraits have lives of their own. The figures in Ron Weasley's chess game move at the command of the players. A music box in Sirius Black's home plays a tune that will lull the listener into an enchanted sleep. These objects can be fun or sinister, but in either case, they provide contrast between the paranormal world and the "normal" world.

More powerful Obvious Objects can be used as plot devices for an entire novel. The children in Edward Eager's *Seven-Day Magic* discover a supernatural library book that transports them to book-related adventures, for example. On a more unusual note, Terry Pratchett uses a supernatural mail-sorting machine as the main object in his extremely funny book *Going Postal*. Once the machine gets going, it sorts letters that haven't even been written yet . . .

THE MYSTERIOUS OBJECT

You can't tell what a Mysterious Object's power is by looking at it. The magic is unrelated to the form. Magic rings fall into this category. Can you tell the difference between a wishing ring and an invisibility ring? Neither can I. And why are they rings, anyway? Why not an invisibility sweat sock or a wishing wristwatch? (I know, I know—because no one can say it.)

Other more traditional Mysterious Objects include potions, scrying crystals, magical jewelry, and Aladdin's magic lamp. Aladdin is rather startled when the djinn emerges in the original fairy tale. At the time the story was written, djinn were free-willed spirits, not wish-granting slaves, and little oil lamps were used for nothing but holding back darkness. The modern equivalent might be finding a fairy in a flashlight.

CREATING A SUPERNATURAL OBJECT

If you want the entire book to revolve around a particular object, you'll probably need a powerful object, one with a general or versatile power. An object that can only wash windows will have limited story potential. The children of Edward Eager's wonderful *Half Magic*, for example, discover a coin that grants half-wishes. (When one of them idly wishes the four of them could play on a desert island, the coin drops the children into the Sahara—desert yes, island no.) This versatile power has the children dealing with Merlin in the time of King Arthur, a house fire, a sister who is only half there, and a cat who can talk, but only half the time—quite the variety.

However, your supernatural object must have limits. A limitless supernatural object removes all conflict from your book. Your story will end very quickly if your protagonist simply has to say, "I wish all my problems were solved." (And you'll need to explain why your supposedly intelligent characters don't wish exactly that.) This means you need to work out exactly what your supernatural object can and cannot do in advance. Limits provide conflict, and conflict leads to plot. You may have noticed, for example, that many fairy tales allow only three wishes. The character uses the first wish to see if the magic really works. He uses the second wish to ask for something big that turns disastrous in some way, forcing him to use the third wish to set things right again. No more wishes—just in time for the story to end. "The Monkey's Paw" by W.W. Jacobs uses this limitation pattern.

Your object can have a limited number of uses, as noted above. Or it might only work under certain conditions—during the day, when the moon is full, after it's dipped in fresh blood. It might need time to "re-charge" after each use, and the more power it uses, the more time it takes to charge up. It might work only for one gender or members of only one family or even only one person. It might drain energy from the user, leaving her exhausted. Or perhaps using the object changes the owner in some undesirable way, like the One Ring from J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*.

Objects can also be lost, stolen, or destroyed. Take away your hero's magic widget just before the final battle and see what happens. Or maybe the original owner comes back for it. Or it breaks, and the only person who can repair it is in a coma. Another character might unwittingly sell it on eBay. Or even worse—hand the thing over to the villain. The villain's power rises just as the hero's power drops. This is wonderful for conflict.

One thing you must not do is give an object a convenient new power that solves the hero's current problem. A hero who falls over a cliff can't unexpectedly discover that his grandfather's time-stopping pocket watch

also lets him fly. This cheats your reader and shows poor writing. However, it's perfectly legal for your hero to find a creative new use for the device's existing power. Perhaps our hero realizes he can slow time as well as stop it, allowing him to drift slowly to the ground. The idea should be plausible within the rules and limitations you set up before you even begin writing.

Finally, an object doesn't just pop into existence. It needs a history. Who made the object, and why? What happened to the original owner? Who else, if anyone, has owned the object before now? Does anyone else know about the object? Is anyone hunting for it? Fleshing these ideas out will give you great ideas for plot development.

Just remember that in the end, the protagonist has to solve the book's problem, preferably without the object. The entire point of reading this type of book is to see how a particular character reacts to having a supernatural object thrust into her life. Your focus should be on the character, not the object. For a truly satisfying ending, the character has to win on her own.

Supernatural People

You can also introduce a supernatural person. Does "person" have to mean "human"? Certainly not. The term person has a pretty broad definition in a paranormal book, but in this section I'm going to stick with mostly human-shaped people.

As with supernatural objects, you can't just drop a supernatural character into a book without thinking carefully first. Even normal people carry around a certain amount of baggage—family history, likes, hates, hobbies, inconvenient food allergies, and so on. But supernatural people carry around an entire ecology. They eat, drink, sleep, and otherwise exist differently than ordinary folk. And just as with supernatural objects, you need to work out your supernatural person's abilities, complete with boundaries and limitations. Once that's done, you need to stay within those boundaries in order to play fair with the reader. Your werewolf, for example, can't spontaneously develop the ability to shoot death rays from his eyes because that ability traditionally has nothing to do with wolves or shape-shifting or being a werecreature. Yes, this is the paranormal, and nothing will stop you from creating such a werewolf, but this will probably mess with your readers' heads, and not in a good way—they may very well toss your book aside. Why? Because you aren't playing fair.

Supernatural people get to have unique motivations for their actions. This can make them both more fun and more challenging, since

you have to think outside the normal human box. Immortals don't worry about death (though they may worry about being killed) and have a rather different idea of what "a long time" means. Paranormals who feed on humans or otherwise depend on humans to exist may look at people as cattle, as possessions to be protected, or as prey that might turn dangerous. Paranormals who haven't interacted with humans before the book opens may be mystified by human behavior, treat humans with condescension, or even be frightened of them. Paranormals who used to be human (such as newly minted werewolves or vampires) are often torn between embracing their new nature and hanging on to their more familiar humanity. Truly powerful paranormals may not realize that humans are sentient—or even notice humans at all.

A supernatural person who falls in love with an ordinary human is such a powerful image that it spawned an entire genre: the paranormal romance. Stephenie Meyer may have gone mega-platinum with her YA *Twilight* novels, but *Dracula* obsessed over Mina Harker a hundred years before Edward and Bella appeared on the scene, and Cupid fell for Psyche nearly two thousand years before that. How to write a paranormal romance would be an entire book in itself, but in short, the conflict often arises between the clash of worlds. One lover is a being of some power, often immortal, who moves in a world that is hostile or even deadly to normal people, and the other lover is an ordinary human who will one day age and die. The story revolves around how these two will reconcile their difficulties so they can be together.

When it comes to building your book, you have several types of supernatural people to choose from. They include (but are not limited to):

VAMPIRES

The perennial favorite. The modern versions usually owe quite a lot to Bram Stoker's novel *Dracula*. Stoker himself seems to have combined fairy lore (the blood-sucking leanan sídhe), history (Vlad the Impaler), and ancient vampire lore to create his famous villain. Vampires traditionally shun sunlight, holy objects, and garlic, and need to drink human blood to live. They are immortal unless killed, usually by a stake through the heart, decapitation, or dismemberment. (Fantasy author Terry Pratchett has noted that all of these work nicely on non-vampires as well.) They usually have supernatural powers that range from super strength to invisibility to mental telepathy to shape-shifting.

Vampires started off as bad guys, but in recent decades, more and more authors have swung around to using them as protagonists. As creatures of the night—or cloudy days, in the case of *Twilight*'s Edward

Cullen—vampires are often portrayed as mysterious, sexy, and powerful with a strangely vulnerable side, since they can still die. Or fall in love.

When you write about vampires, you need to work out in advance exactly what they can and cannot do. The checklist below may help:

THE VAMPIRE CHECKLIST

Powers

- Extra strength
- Extra speed
- Shape-shifting
- Bat
- Wolf
- Mist
- Other: _____
- Enhanced senses
- Mesmerism
- Resistance to physical damage
- Flight
- Wall climbing
- Teleportation
- Leaping
- Claws
- Can create new vampires
- Self-healing
- Telepathy
- Animal control
- Weather control
- Immortal
- Inhumanly handsome/beautiful
- Other: _____

Weaknesses

- Repelled by holy objects
- Repelled by garlic (or other strong scent)
- Must feed on blood
- How often: _____
- Only from a living human
- Can feed on animal blood
- Can feed on stored blood
- Effect when can't get blood: _____
- Can be hurt or killed by
- Dismemberment

- ___ Decapitation
- ___ Stake through the heart
- ___ Silver
- ___ Sunlight
- ___ Fire
- ___ Other: _____
- ___ Can't cross running water
- ___ Can't see reflection in a mirror
- ___ Image can't be captured (photo, video, etc.)
- ___ Comatose during the day
- ___ Can't enter a home without being invited
- ___ Can't enter hallowed ground
- ___ Must rest on earth from homeland
- ___ Inhumanly ugly
- ___ Other: _____

You also need to know whether these rules apply to all vampires in your world or just some of them. Perhaps older vampires have fewer weaknesses and more strengths, for example, or perhaps a vampire can overcome weaknesses temporarily, especially if he's just had a big meal.

Vampires are a challenge to write about. Why? Readers may love reading about them, but the bookstores are already saturated with vampire novels. The difficulty lies in coming up with something new to say. Did you see that "Other" space in the Vampire Checklist? Don't leave it blank. Try going back to the original folklore for ideas. Plenty of nocturnal paranormal creatures out there have a hankering for human blood.

Another way to be creative is to make an unlikely character into a vampire. Instead of the usual Handsome Man or Sexy Woman or Goth Kid getting the fang, go for a different type. What about a vampire accountant? Or a vampire ranch worker? Or a vampire circus clown? Lucienne Diver's vampires made a fashion-obsessed high school girl and her chess geek boyfriend into bloodsucking undead in *Vamped* with great success. Her vampires' powers and weaknesses don't depart too far from the established folklore, but her characters are fresh and new, and that makes all the difference.

ANGELS AND DEMONS

They come to Earth to steal our hearts or terrify our souls. Sometimes it's both at the same time. As agents of divine or infernal powers, they were taboo as protagonists for a long time, but lately they've been showing up as main characters in more and more novels.

A demon appears in the mortal realm, often with some sort of terrible task, but then it discovers it wants to stay here, either because it's fallen in love or because things are much more interesting here on Earth than in Hell. Some demons are trying to escape Hell, or earn their freedom from it. Many are shape-shifters, able to take on animal shapes or any human form.

Angels often find themselves in the same situation, but mirror-reversed—sent down to Earth to accomplish some divine duty, only to realize that life down here is more diverting than in Heaven. Some angels have been cast out and need to earn their way back home.

The fun of using an angel or demon comes from mixing shades of gray. Angels and demons are supposed to be creatures of pure good or pure evil. Putting them on Earth, where almost nothing is absolute, taints their purity and forces them to deal with it, an endlessly fascinating device for writers and readers alike.

Angels and demons of folklore have an enormous variety of powers and limitations. There's simply no standard angel or demon. This means you can give them any ability you like, but it also means it's vitally important to set the limitations and stick with them.

ZOMBIES

Zombies are enjoying a new life, so to speak. They started off as mindless monsters under the control of an evil magician, then evolved into brain-eating hordes, and have recently become . . . good guys?

The main challenge of writing zombie good guys is the ick factor. Zombies are walking, rotting corpses that eat human flesh, and it's hard to empathize with something like that. Stacey Jay gets around this by playing it for laughs in *You Are So Undead to Me*, in which a high school girl discovers she's a "Settler," someone who can end the unresolved problems that bring the dead shambling from their graves.

The other factor zombie authors have to think about is how zombies are made—and destroyed. In original folklore, they were raised by a voodoo (voodoo, vodoun) sorcerer in a complicated ritual. Their main weakness (other than a bad smell and an inability to heal wounds) was salt. Flinging a handful on a zombie would de-animate it, melt it, or otherwise destroy it. Since then, other ways to create zombies have cropped up—disease, radiation, poisons, meteor strikes, even nanotechnology—and each version has its own weaknesses. Often a chainsaw is involved. Although the movie version has been around for quite some time, this type of supernatural character is a relative newcomer to paranormal novels with lots of potential to explore.

SHAPE-SHIFTERS

There's something irresistible about being able to change shapes. Shape-shifters get to release the inner beast and do cool things in animal shape even as they roil in angst over what terrible deeds they may have wrought. They are forced to cross the thin line between human and animal, and often face the unsettling discovery that releasing the beast brings rather more enjoyment than it should.

Werecreatures are the cursed version of shape-shifters. They must change shape under certain conditions. When in the cursed shape, the beast takes control, and the human side has little or no memory of what happens. Early on, many werecreatures have no idea what's happening to them, or even that they carry the curse. Some even join the hunt for the terrible beast that's begun rampaging through the town.

The most famous of these beasts is the werewolf, a human who becomes a ravenous wolf on nights of the full moon. Werewolf folklore varies. Some people become werewolves on purpose by living an evil life or through a complicated magical ritual. Others are bitten by a werewolf and accidentally become one. And some are born into werewolf families, such as the Heerkens family in *Blood Trail* by Tanya Huff. Although werewolves have the advantage of familiarity—there's less to explain and the reader is more willing to come along for the ride—they have the disadvantage of being overly familiar ground, meaning you'll have to work a little harder to make your werewolf interesting.

But there's no reason to stay solely with wolves. In her Anita Blake books, Laurell K. Hamilton uses a number of different werecreatures, including lions, tigers, leopards, rats, foxes, hyenas, jaguars, snakes, and even swans. This is the paranormal—pick an animal and run with it.

Other shape-shifters aren't actually cursed like werecreatures. They can simply take one or more animal shapes at will. Selkies from Irish and Scottish folklore are seals that change into humans, for example. They sometimes fall in love with ordinary mortals, but eventually return to the sea, leaving a sorrowful husband or wife behind. The Manitou from Peter Straub's *Ghost Story* is an evil shape-shifter that can take many forms, as can Mulgarath, the ogre villain from *The Spiderwick Chronicles* books by Holly Black and Tony DiTerlizzi.

Shape-shifters often have abilities beyond changing shape. Their human forms might have the sharp senses of an animal, for example, and their animal forms are often bigger, faster, and stronger than a normal animal of the same kind. Other shape-shifters can command animals from their own species. Laurell K. Hamilton's werewolves can force normal wolves to do their bidding, for example. Notice, however, that these

powers usually have something to do with the type of animal involved. It wouldn't make sense to have a wereswan that can turn coal into diamonds, though you could probably get away with one that could learn to fly in human form, since swans have flying ability.

The primary idea to remember with shape-shifters is that, like all supernatural characters, they need to have limitations. If your werewolves are fast and strong and smart and impossible to kill, why don't they rule over the puny humans of the world? Answer: They have debilitating weaknesses that prevent it. Hamilton's werewolves can change form at will, but they need a lot of food right after they've changed, and when they return to human form, they fall comatose—easy prey for enemies. To make things even more challenging, werecreatures who spend too much time as animals find it difficult to regain human form. You need to make sure your own shape-shifters have good reason to stay in the shadows—unless you're writing about a world ruled by shape-shifters.

FAIRIES

Fairies cover a wide range of supernatural people, including elves, dwarves, brownies, dryads, gnomes, kobolds, goblins, merfolk, trolls, and more. They are often long-lived or outright immortal, and usually visit the human world from some other realm. Often, they don't change, and chaotic, ever-shifting humans fascinate them.

Fairies are similar to angels and demons in that they come in many shapes and forms, depending on their original folklore, and each type of fairy usually has its own powers and weaknesses. A leprechaun must give anyone who captures him a wish. Greedy dwarves create amazing magical objects. Trolls are strong but stupid, and they turn to stone in daylight. Beautiful, immortal elves often fail to understand brutish, short-lived humans. Non-European cultures have fairies as well. In Japan, the mischievous kitsune, or fox spirit, loves practical jokes. Tennyo live on mountaintops and fascinate mortals with their impossible beauty. Yosei can change into swans and cranes.

European fairies usually fear iron and sunlight, which either cripple or kill them. There are any number of other ways mortals can ward them off, including turning their clothes inside-out, striking a church bell, or getting drunk. Often mortals who encounter fairies forget the incident later, or remember it only as a dream. Raymond E. Feist uses fairies as antagonists in a modern setting to marvelous effect in his book *Faerie Tale*.

Numerous books have used elves as major characters. Legolas in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* is perhaps the most famous example, and Margaret Weis and Tracy Hickman created Tanis, a half-elven, half-human

protagonist, for their Dragonlance fantasy series. Anyone who wants to use an elf as a main character will be inevitably compared to these two. To get around this, Mercedes Lackey took elves out of their traditional fantasy setting and used them as race car drivers in the SERRAteD Edge series she wrote with various co-authors. The new setting and new plot went a long way toward reinvigorating an old trope. Hint hint.