

Foreshadowing, and what I've learnt from its use in fantasy.

One of the things that has always fascinated me in books is foreshadowing. For those of you who know me in real life, you might remember that over a year ago I did an essay on the foreshadowing present in William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*. Now that I've read more, I have far more extensive examples of excellent foreshadowing, and by analyzing them I am able to understand how it is used, so that I can apply it to my own writing.

First of all, what is foreshadowing? Foreshadowing is a literary device that is used to lay clues, all throughout a book (or a whole series) of the events that will happen later on. Those hints are there so that a reader will be able to pick up on them, and if it's done well, give the feeling that something was surprising but inevitable, avoiding scenarios that may turn into a *deus ex machina*¹.

What have I learnt about foreshadowing? I've mentioned several times that the foreshadowing present in Robert Jordan's *Wheel of Time* and Brandon Sanderson's *Cosmere* is masterful. Through my notes, I have been able to identify and analyze different instances where this device is used, and a few things have stood out. First, it's normally hidden as other information, unless it's blatantly obvious, which is not really the case. This information can be characterization, world building, or an element of plot. The authors hide it in plain sight, and you take the information to be just another detail, until you start getting close to the reveal, and it all starts adding up, showing the image that every piece of the puzzle had a part of. Second, foreshadowing takes practice. It needs to be refined in every draft, as the book changes. I now know that there is no pressure to get it right the first time, and that most of the work will be done from the second draft onwards.

SPOILERS FOR WARBREAKER, THE WHEEL OF TIME ALL THE WAY THROUGH AMOL, MISTBORN AND THE STORMLIGHT ARCHIVE UNTIL OATHBRINGER (in that order).

I want to start talking about *Warbreaker*. There, most of the foreshadowing, especially regarding Denth and Tonk Fah's betrayal of Vivenna is hidden through humor. They state their intentions outright the whole time, but mask it behind a veil of humor, and both Vivenna and the reader never take them seriously until the betrayal. Regarding the truth about the God King and Vasher, the hints are much vaguer, but they're still there. They are hidden in bits of history casually mentioned, and in the thoughts of our two Idrian characters for the first, and in Vasher's point of view, his conversations with Nightblood, Vivenna's questions regarding who he is, and what Denth mentions of their history. (Sanderson, 2010)

For the *Wheel of Time*, we have a slightly different scenario, since it is a very long series, stretching over fourteen books, but it does bring a very interesting analysis for how foreshadowing is handled in a long series like this one. When you think about foreshadowing in the *Wheel of Time*, one of the first things that jumps out is Min's visions. She can see auras around people and sometimes predict what will happen to them. I won't mention all of them for the sake of being brief, but I will for some of the most notable ones. Min predicts everything from the events at the Tower of Ghenjei when she talked about an eye on a scale, to the *Crown of Swords* with the mention of a golden crown of laurels, to the final

scenes of *A Memory of Light* with the three women standing over a funeral bier. In this case, the foreshadowing is obvious, but very difficult to figure out until the events happen, since the viewings are vague, and many times metaphorical.

Another key piece of foreshadowing is the story of Tigraine told by a farmer who gives a ride to Mat and Rand. He says “and Tigraine vanished—run off or dead—when it was time for her to take the throne.” (Jordan, 1990, pg 525). This is just a very small part, and not coherent, but things start to fall into place with *Shadow Rising*, when Amys tells Rand the story of Shaiel, and how she came to the Waste because of a foretelling. (The Shadow Rising/Chapter 34, 2020). This story is one of the hints towards Rand’s true identity, and that of his biological parents. The hints are scattered all over the books, and it would be too much to compile them all, but these are some of the most important.

Finally, we have what the Aelfinn and Eelfinn told Mat. The two times they interact with Mat in *Shadow Rising* are full of foreshadowing that is hard to catch the subtle clues, since there is so much to dissect, so like before, I will mention the important ones.

Mat’s first question is whether he should return home to help his people. The Finn tell him that he must go to Rhuidean, and Mat is so distracted with the fact that they said he had to go to Rhuidean that he asks a different question, “Why should I?”, instead of the one he planned. They tell him that he will die if he does not go, and Mat asks why. Their answer is “You will have sidestepped the thread of fate, left your fate to drift on the winds of time, and you will be killed by those who do not want fate fulfilled.” They tell him to go, and Mat asks what fate. (Jordan, n.d.) Here is where the foreshadowing is most prominent. They tell him “To marry the Daughter of the Nine Moons! To die and live again, and live once more a part of what was! To give up half the light of the world to save the world!” (Jordan, n.d.)

If you dissect this scene, we do not really have answers to the first couple of questions, since Mat does end up going to Rhuidean, but the last three statements become clear. The first refers to Tuon, and is fulfilled in *Knife of Dreams* when Tuon completes the marriage ceremony. The second refers to when Mat died in Fires of Heaven, but later is back because the Balefire undid the effect of his death, as well as possibly his memories of the generals and the creation of the Band. Finally, the last refers to the scene in *Towers of Midnight* where he gives up his eye to save the group in the Tower of Ghenjei, allowing him and the others to escape, and go on to take a part in the Last Battle, where he was critical in the victory of the Light because he wasn’t susceptible to Compulsion, as well as his leadership skills and knowledge of military tactics.

The second interaction is much more subtle, because they don’t say anything about the future, but they grant Mat his wishes, in ways that are useful in the future, especially regarding the Ashanderi. Mat asks for the holes in his memory and in his life to be filled, for a way to be rid of the Aes Sedai, and a way to get back to Rhuidean. Those requests are fulfilled by his memories of the great generals in history, the Foxhead medallion ter’angreal that blocks the One Power, and appearing back in Rhuidean, hanging, but with the Ashanderi. The biggest element of foreshadowing in this instance is the Ashanderi. At the time, there is no real explanation for it, since it doesn’t directly fulfill any of the requests to the knowledge of the reader or Mat, but later, Mat realizes that the Ashanderi is his way out, and uses it to escape the Tower of Ghenjei. (“Towers of Midnight chapter summaries”, 2020)

The conclusion for the foreshadowing in the *Wheel of Time* is that it is used in diverse ways, hidden in histories, or in vage foretellings, as well as in lines of dialogue or thoughts. What we can learn from it as writers, is to vary the methods used, and to do it in a

way that the hints are subtle, hidden in details that the readers might not remember specifically, especially in scenes that are critical, where they will be focusing on other information.

Moving on to some of the other books in the *Cosmere*, though there are many examples I could use, I want to talk about the epigraphs in *Mistborn* and *Stormlight*. The epigraphs are located at the beginning of each chapter, and are generated in-world, coming from diverse sources, from historical documents, to scientific documents, to diaries, and books in-world.

The epigraphs in the third *Mistborn* book, *The Hero of Ages*, were written by Sazed, after his Ascension at the end of the book. They speak in retrospect of the events of the whole trilogy, and even talk about the events at the end of the book. The way they are separated, the fact that the reader still doesn't have a complete understanding of the situation, and how readers do not think much about the epigraphs, since they are eager to continue on with the plot, contribute to how Sanderson hid this information until just the right moment, to give the feeling of surprising but inevitable, since the information from the epigraphs is stored subconsciously, the reader can remember it when the big reveal happens.

One of the first pieces of foreshadowing that is essential is in chapter 11. "The First Contract, oft spoken of by the kandra, was originally just a series of promises made by the First Generation to the Lord Ruler. They wrote these promises down, and in doing so codified the first kandra laws. They were worried about governing themselves, independently of the Lord Ruler and his empire. So, they took what they had written to him, asking for his approval. He commanded it cast into steel, then personally scratched a signature into the bottom. This code was the first thing that a kandra learned upon awakening from his or her life as a mistwraith. It contained commands to revere earlier generations, simple legal rights granted to each kandra, provisions for creating new kandra, and a demand for ultimate dedication to the Lord Ruler. Most disturbingly, the First Contract contained a provision which, if invoked, would require the mass suicide of the entire kandra people." (Sanderson, 2008) This epigraph talks about the First Contract of the Kandra, which by the end of the book is discovered to be the agreement to be the double agents, and to remove their hemalurgic spikes to prevent Ruin from taking control, as well as hiding the Atium that is Ruin's body. It is that last sentence, which talks about the provision that will require the mass suicide of the kandra people that foreshadows this. The mention of the laws is a slight reference to TenSoon's arc, as he is deemed a traitor for breaking one of the laws. There is also a very small foreshadowing to the fact that Ruin can change things not written in metal, with the mention of how the Lord Ruler commanded the laws to be cast into steel, to prevent Ruin from changing them and corrupting the purpose of the kandra.

The second, in the epigraph of chapter 47, talks about Ruin's body. "This weakness was caused by part of Ruin's power—his very body—having been taken and hidden from him. Which was why Ruin became so obsessed with finding the hidden part of his self." This one refers to how Preservation hid the Atium. Though it doesn't talk about the resolution of this conflict, it sets it up before time. Ruin has been searching for the Atium by this point, but the readers and the characters for the most part don't know about it.

The epigraphs for the *Stormlight Archive* are different. Each part has epigraphs from a different source, from the Death Rattles in *Way of Kings* to the Gemstone Archive in Urithiru from *Oathbringer*. The first examples, from *Way of Kings*, are in the form of the death rattles, glimpses into the spiritual realm that someone gets as they die, granted by the Unmade Moelach. At first these rattles are very confusing to the readers, but upon a reread, they give away one of the big reveals at the end of *Way of Kings*, and crucial events in *Words of Radiance*. The first is in the fourth chapter. "I'm dying, aren't I? Healer, why do you take my blood? Who is that beside you, with his head of lines? I can see a distant sun, dark and cold, shining in a black sky." (Sanderson, 2010) This is foreshadowing the reveal about Taranvagian slowly killing the terminal patients in his hospital to obtain the Death Rattles. The second, also from Part One of *The Way of Kings* is the following. "They named it the Final Desolation, but they lied. Our gods lied. Oh, how they lied. The Everstorm comes. I hear its whispers, see its stormwall, know its heart." (Sanderson, 2010) This one becomes clear in *Words of Radiance*, with the coming of the Everstorm, the true mark of the Final Desolation.

Moving on to *Words of Radiance*, starting with the epigraphs from Navani's Journal in Part One. The one that stands out the most, as the rest are related to the Everstorm and the change in the Parshendi is the following in chapter seven. "I was unprepared for the grief my loss brought—like an unexpected rain—breaking from a clear sky and crashing down upon me. Gavilar's death years ago was overwhelming, but this...this nearly crushed me." (Sanderson, 2014) Though Navani is specifically referring to Jasnah's 'death', this also mirrors her reaction to Elhokar's. It isn't heavily focused on in *Oathbringer*, since she is informed in the middle of the Battle of Thaylen Field, but it still shocks her immensely, something that is mentioned in the early chapters of *Rhythm of War*. The next quote comes from the Listener song of spren, and can be found in Part 2. "But it is not impossible to blend / Their Surges to ours in the end. / It has been promised and it can come. / Or do we understand the sum? / We questioned not if they can have us then, / But if we dare to have them again." (Sanderson, 2014) With their reference of blending Surges, it sets up the moment when Venli, one of the point of view characters for the Parshendi, or Listeners, bonds Timbre, a lightspren, making her a Willshaper. Like the song says, it is a highly unlikely occurrence because of how the Listeners are only in one form at a time, but it sets up the possibility of this happening for when it eventually does.

Finally, the most recent book (until September of 2020) of the *Stormlight Archive*, is *Oathbringer*. The third book of this epic series is known for its climax, with the massive Battle of Thaylen Field, and all the events that are a part of what is called the Sanderson Avalanche. Everything comes crashing down, but the events fit and make sense, thanks to the extensive foreshadowing Sanderson has put into the previous books and this one. The first, preceding chapter 25, is from the preface to *Oathbringer* (the book in-world). "I will confess my murders before you. Most painfully, I have killed someone who loved me dearly." (Sanderson, 2017) This goes right over the reader's head, but is giving the reader the truth about Evi and Dalinar. He is outright confessing that he killed her. Of course, nobody would think that Dalinar would have written a book, but the following quote "I know that many women who read this will see it only as further proof that I am the godless heretic everyone claims." (Sanderson, 2017) gives the perfect foreshadowing to the fact that Dalinar did write a book, something that he decides to do at the end of *Oathbringer* (the actual book). It lays

out much of Dalinar's character arc, both in the past and the present, at the very beginning of the book.

The epigraphs show another way to hide information that foreshadows future events. Readers see them as little tidbits of sources in-world, and nothing more, sometimes even deciding not to read them to get to the actual story. Instead, they are hiding crucial information that builds up to reveal the truth, probably of one of the big reveals. The fact that the readers generally look over them, or are confused by what they mean makes them the perfect place for foreshadowing.

So with all this analysis of different examples of foreshadowing, what can be taken from them? From *Warbreaker*, to hide foreshadowing in unlikely places like humor, from *Wheel of Time*, how it can be hidden in critical scenes where the smallest details will be overlooked, or being vague enough with something that is clearly foreshadowing but is practically impossible to figure out what it means until something happens. From *Mistborn* and *Stormlight*, how to use epigraphs and parts of the story that readers won't pay attention to or will find puzzling to lay down the bases but surprise them at the end. There are many different methods, but the overall conclusion is that foreshadowing can be used to great effect with all of them, but that it takes practice and revising to get right.

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