



7 CURES FOR CLICHES

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Cliches aren't wrong because audiences have seen them before. The problem is that clichés do not carry your author voice. Cliches move your story along while robbing your story of YOU.

At the same time, you don't have to start from scratch. Dragons work. They resonate with audiences worldwide for dozens of reasons. Pick any one reason and use it as an emotional target to aim for.

With very little work—just a few quick questions—you're about to systematically personalize your dragons so brilliantly that stereotypical dragons will never satisfy you again.

1. MONSTER MACGUFFIN SHUFFLE

Create a dragon-sized problem

If you love fighting dragons, start here for spicy, meaningful combat.

“MacGuffins” are anything that motivates or enables plot without impacting it. Things are considered MacGuffins if they are 1) interchangeable items of value or power and 2) useless outside the story.

Most dragons are MacGuffins. They kickstart quests. They exist to be challenged. You could swap them out with any toothy creature or pretty unicorn and still use the same plot.

So that’s exactly what this strategy does. Start with a MacDragon blueprint. Then swap the creature while retaining a dragon’s Macfunctions.

Let’s break down the basic fighting assets of a traditional dragon.

- **Fire** – Burns stuff. Yup.
- **Scales** – Armor. Reduces efficacy of your weapons.
- **Big** – Your spear is basically a splinter. Gearing up to fight requires strategy.

- **Wings** – Easy escape from you, you pathetic little ground slug.
- **Teeth** – You can ignore these if having arms is optional.
- **Strength** – Stronger than you, and that’s all that matters.

Now think deeper.

Traditional dragons presume ONE primary type of strength: raw muscle. What other kinds of strength are there?

Strength in numbers is terrifying. Take snails, for example. Persistent little bastards.

One snail, not a big deal. But if a nest of snails hatches nearby, good luck keeping your succulents safe. So... imagine fire snails that cause wildfires.

Now consider the plots you could play with. Snails in force already destroy real-world ecosystems. Imagine the war humans would go on to snuff out snails that sporadically set things on fire. Imagine how much impact that would have on architecture, clothing, and world ecology.

Then... what if snails were the only known

way to START a fire? What if you didn’t know until you mostly wiped them out?

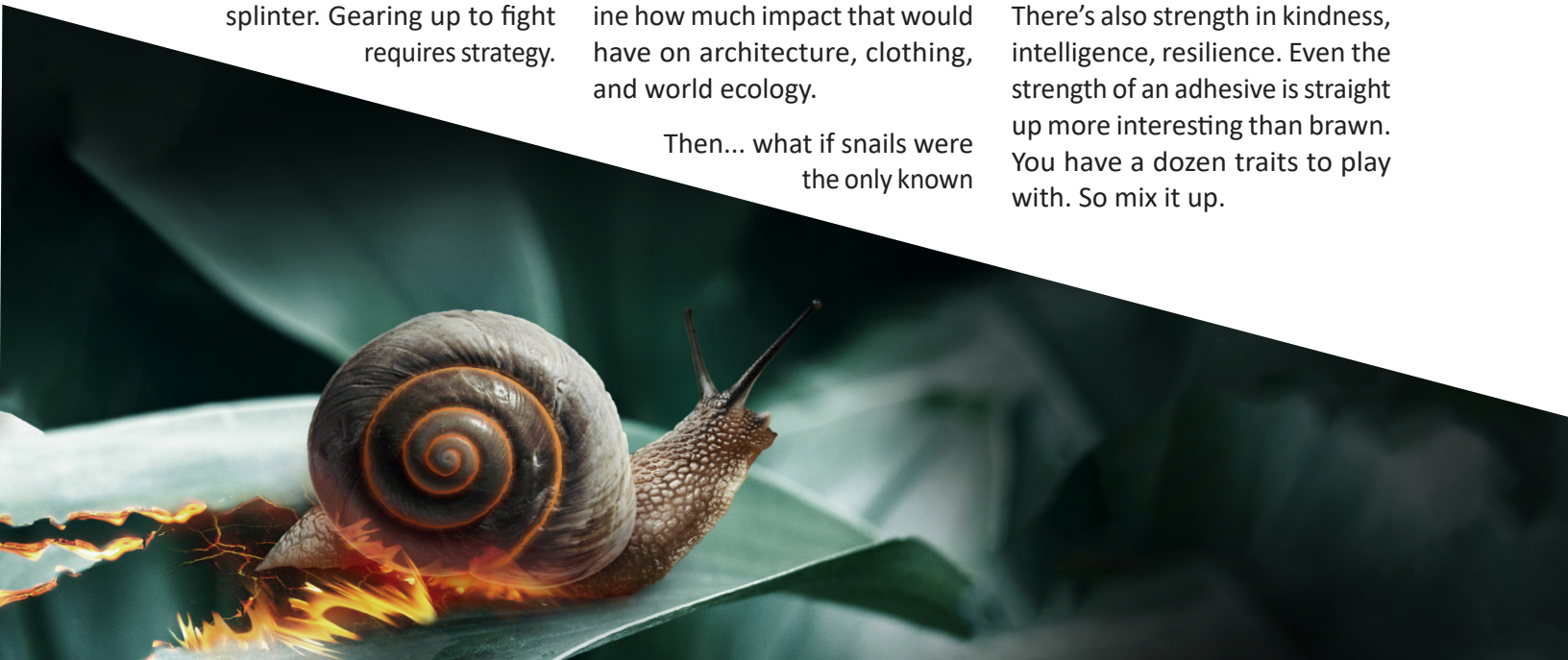
Suddenly, snails become meaningful gifts, gestures of respect. You’d keep your snail in a little box and take immaculate care of it.

Maybe they’re rare enough that you only have one per village. The death of your tribe’s snail would probably trigger a dissolution of the tribe. Likewise, if the snail makes babies, the tribe has the freedom to split.

All we’ve done was question what TYPE of strength to give our monster. Simple monster premise. Then we wrapped a culture around it.

Isn’t that fantastic? Asking just one question gets you far enough away from traditional dragons that there are no nearby stereotypes to rely on, and new, totally natural stories start to write themselves.

That’s just one type of strength. There’s also strength in kindness, intelligence, resilience. Even the strength of an adhesive is straight up more interesting than brawn. You have a dozen traits to play with. So mix it up.



2. ANCHORING

Same feeling, different details

Anchoring is similar to the MacGuffin Shuffle, in that you still shoot to create the same feeling of a dragon and you still swap details.

The difference is, in the MacGuffin shuffle you start with the same symbolism. With Anchoring, you latch onto the big picture feeling—just the emotion itself.

So... What do you love about dragons?

I love dragons as telepathic pets—being mind-bonded to something both sweet and feral. I crave deep connection and don't mind if the thing I connect to changes me in return.

I also love the wings. Stories of flying pull me out of my head and straight into my body. I wake up from the book aching to dance, ice skate, learn the trapeze. I'm hungry to recreate that bodily thrill of being alive in real life.

So let's take these two anchors, and replace every raw dragon detail, while leaving those three emotions intact.

1) Bonding to something both sweet and feral. Deep connection that changes me in turn.

2) I wake from the story aching to dance and move my body in real life.

The two details that cause these feelings are the telepathic bond and the wings—so **that's what we'll replace first.**

If you have Mythulu Cards, pull them out, or download the free Mythulu app for Android and iOS.

For the bond (Question 1), draw purple Traits cards—at least two. Draw until you have one happy trait and one challenging trait.

For me, I draw Locked, which is negative. My second card, Hibernates, implies rest. Resting is a good thing.

The Resting card has a picture of a bear, and I'm already starting to picture a cozy, lazy, fluffy sort of animal—daily inspiration to cuddle down into a nap.

For liberating movement (Question 2), draw a Habitat card. Your story goal is to make that habitat feel so exciting that people want to run outside and explore the nearest one.

Flip through Habitat cards until you find a few that excite you. This is called a Biased Pool. Pick your favorite.

In my case, I'm already thinking of a winter landscape, something mountainous. The thought of a fat, lumbering turd of fluff, like a giant winter caterpillar, makes me laugh. So that's my creature.

For bodily thrill, I'm going to say this creature has a slick, hard underbelly, like a potato beetle, that's wonderful for sledding down hills. To keep the creature from triggering a "that's a dragon" response from my audience, I'll stay away from slithering snake-

like movements. Instead, when my creature wants to summit again, it crawls like a gigantic inchworm, lumbering slowly, patiently upward.

We haven't addressed the "Locked" prompt yet. This creature is wild, after all. It's supposed to change me. That's the feeling we're anchoring to.

"Locked" reminds me of animals locked in zoos. Also, cocoons. Did you know caterpillars don't just morph into butterflies? They dissolve completely into a cellular soup, then rebuild themselves in a new form.

I'm also reminded of the way beekeepers artificially suppress beehives. Hives naturally grow and split when they get too big. This is good for nature but bad for honey production, so beekeepers don't allow it.

Let's make our fluffy caterpillar friend the producer of an economic staple. It doesn't matter what. But this creature is livestock. So farmers suppress it, keeping it in larval form. Whenever it tries to cocoon itself, it's interrupted.

Bond to this creature. Now you're motivated to protect it from the world while it ascends. Put your hero through the same experience---a remaking of themselves, surrendering everything and rewriting their identity entirely. What a winter.

When the creature emerges, you are both ready for a new life.



3. VOICE ASSERTION

Same details, different feeling

This method changes the end emotion your audience feels. You don't HAVE to use a dragon, but even if you do, your dragon FEELS different than any dragon they've met before.

Have you ever gone spelunking in a cave?

Have you ever watched an egg hatch?

Have you ever had a pet? If so, what pet changed you the most? How? What did you learn?

Somewhere in the dragon archetype, there's a detail that you have personal experience with, or experience-based expertise.

Anchor to that memory. Your goal for your plot is now to give your audience the same experience.

Example... Fire is quintessential to dragons. When people try to swap out dragon-ish details, fire is the last thing to go.

But just swapping out fire for another element does NOT elevate your story. Instead, you need to look deeply at the archetype of fire.

Dig into your bank account of memories. What does fire mean to YOU?

Here's what fire means to me. I'm a wilderness survival expert. I can make fire from friction, in the rain, in the dark, and totally blindfolded. Fire lives in my fingers.

I almost started a wildfire once. I've cooked on fires and gone nights without food because fire wasn't available. I've seen fires gather people together even when they're fighting. I once kept a fire alive for three days in winter with nothing to feed it but soggy, frozen wood.

To me, fire is the element of connection. Fire is safety. Fire is food. Fire is responsibility. Fire is pride. Yes, I've been burned, but overall my memories of fire are wildly positive.

Can I write a dragon who terrorizes with fire? No.

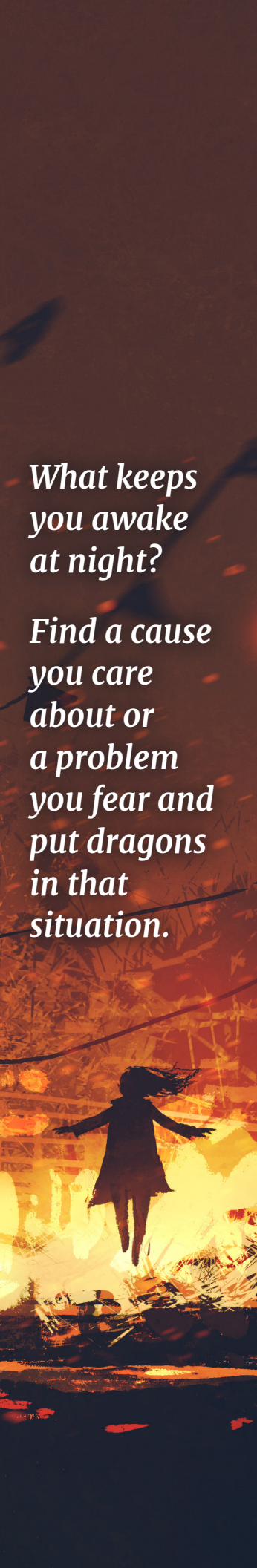
Can I write a story about fire? Hell, yes. But if I do, I should attach fire to a creature that makes you feel about fire the way I feel about fire. A dangerous and fragile creature, hard to tame, that ultimately offers comfort, peace, rejuvenation, a haven at the end of hard days.

Are you seeing the pattern for fixing clichés?

Each time, we pick 1-3 things about dragons to preserve—an element, a feeling, a function. We banish every other dragonish detail except one, we keep purging clichés until people looking at our creature will feel dragon-sized feelings without possibly being able to say, "That's a dragon".

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*What keeps
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*Find a cause
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4. TOTAL PLOT MAKEOVER

Same creature, different plot

If you keep the traditional dragon, change the plot. The ENTIRE plot.

You must replace all the stereotypical roles. Either the dragon must be in a role/situation that entirely changes the rules of interaction or the humans must. And honestly, why not do both?

NO DAMSELS IN DISTRESS. NO WARRIORS TO THE RESCUE. For plot inspiration, look at real life.

Style A: SOAPBOX

Reach into your personal soapbox and identify something you care about.

Are you a mother? Write a story about a dragon born premature—a full century early. It leaves the magnificent immortal creature mentally/physically disabled.

What a way to talk about hard things, eh? What better way to make your audience FEEL the value of a soul, and the troubled state of our mental health institutions, and the very real experience of what it's like to love someone who can't—at least in your lifetime—give back as much as you give?

Or maybe you care about bees? Then imagine a story that begins with a mortician performing an autopsy on a wyvern, desperately trying to understand why they are dying off in droves---because if he can't save wyverns, their entire ecology will collapse.

Are you a vet tired of euthanizing healthy animals? A frustrated college student trapped by debt? What keeps you awake at night? Find a cause you care about or a problem you fear and put dragons in that situation.

Worried about being preachy? Well... yes, that's a risk. But avoiding deep discussion is worse than being preachy—you're broadcasting borrowed ideals. Stereotypes still preach.

Their sermons are just super outdated. So preach away. If you start from a place you care about, at least you're being honest.

Style B: JUST LAUGH

What if instead of being glorious, dragons cleaned our bathrooms? What if a land-dwelling Plecostomus moved around your house like a living Roomba, sanitizing your tile? What if it drank from the toilet sometimes?

So debase the usual glory, or elevate the absurd. Both styles emphasize your unique perspective on life.

Good comedy hits harder when it has a target, so this is not mutually exclusive with Soapbox style.

If you charge in with a message, I recommend starting where your reader is. If your story is meant to change the heart of people who are currently obsessed with being pretty princesses, then you need to start by validating their perspective.

Acknowledge the desire. Start with a girl who is a princess and wants to be the dazzling diamond-dripping goddess, but lives in a culture where princesses play a more important role. Walk your character slowly, realistically through the discovery process of embracing her larger purpose.

This "start where they are" rule is especially important if you wish to face heftier topics like racism or transphobia. Rushing in angry rarely gets through. If you start where they're at—leading with empathy (perhaps a bad bullying experience that plants fear that explodes into racism later)—your book is more likely to reach the people who need it most, and to penetrate the layers of self-deception that plague us all.

5. PALETTE SWAP

Aesthetics only, tied to a theme

Changing textures is your minimum obligation. It's the lowest form of creativity. It's novice work if texture swaps are ALL you do. But sometimes stereotypes are useful. Sometimes you're writing for kids, and their heart's honest desire is a fluffy dragon, served straight.

Fantastic Beasts movie included two beautiful dragons that fall into the "I evolved like this" category: A feathered fire dragon and a water dragon made from seaweed. Those dragons stepped into each scene with attitude, contributed energy and awe, and was simply fun to interact with.

So if you want a simple creature, mostly dragonish yet quirky, don't swap textures out piecemeal, patchwork style, one at a time.

It's not enough to be weird. Be weird with precision. Be weird with a purpose. Be weird with the weight of passion behind it.

So change aesthetics thematically, the way graphic designers do. Give your dragon a new theme palette. What would a Christmas dragon look like?

Now add a Christmas-oriented need. If you wanted a dragon that helps you feel Christmas again as an adult, how would you do it?

What did Christmas use to be about anyway? It meant time off from school, right? It meant people doted on you and you felt secure in their doting.

If your life was less charmed, what WAS your favorite part of Christmas? Do you secretly enjoy Christmas songs playing all the time? Maybe your wonderful winter dragon makes a set of sounds that are repetitive and really, really obnoxious.

Or maybe the best part of Christmas was your neighbor Bob who babysat you while your parents worked. Maybe Christmas, to you, means checkers and cheap hot cocoa and not appreciating until later the weird old man who bought you piping hot candied almonds in the park once a year.

Whatever the thematic textures of Christmas are TO YOU—that's your palette.

Along with this visual makeover, appeal to all the senses along the same thematic palette. Add Christmas sounds and smells.

Finally, add a winter-specific experience. Something tactile.

Maybe your dragon sucks heat out of things and concentrates it within itself to survive—so even though the dragon is warm inside, when YOU touch it, it feels freezing cold.

Such a dragon can't stay with you forever, because you can't stay cold forever. But you can have some wonderful adventures with such an animal.

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6. FIRE & ICE

Pairing danger and desire in one body

When a monster fails to impress, we are all tempted to add more intense details until the dragon becomes an eye-rolling overpowered arsenal. Even if your genre calls for extreme gilding, dripping blood and diamond teeth have almost no impact on awe.

The easiest mistake to make with monsters is trying to completely "exoticize" them.

All monsters represent the "other"—that which is not like us. Building monsters from mind-boggling, non-human details is GOOD. Unfamiliarity elicits some

trepidation, and you need enough to feel, "that's not like me."

Once your monster's repugnance is sufficiently established, do what storytelling expert Stant Litore recommends and "look for the familiar in the midst of great difference."

Teeth and tails build a cloud of chaos. But that one familiar, attractive detail creates the yin-yang dangerous-but-beautiful gut feeling readers get from traditional dragons.

You can recreate that duality in any creature.

Start with a universal fear. Make a monster that personifies that problem. Then pair that fear with a universal desire.

Don't just use shiny diamonds. Wealth is exotic, not relatable. Pick something intimate. Something simple. Something you need enough to make you slightly desperate, sufficiently stupid, or simply homesick.

Regardless of your dragon's polarity—friend or foe—conflicting elements forces us to explore the things that scare us to death.

7. I, MONSTER

Internalizing the dragon

So, can you just internalize the dragon?

Well, sure. But keep in mind, it's not just the external details of dragons that are worn out. It's the symbolism, the very vibe of a basic dragon is totally overused.

If you just attach fire, gold, sharp teeth, and a thing for kidnapping princesses to a human, I can't FEEL anything new. You might get a, "Ha, cute", but nobody NEEDS your story.

You can swap any dragon detail, but your author voice must remain the foundation of any change. Otherwise, your changes are senseless. It's chaos. It's

low-concept. Different textures, same soul.

Consider the same story—internalizing the dragon—but after doing the work to personalize the elements.

As I said, Fire means connection to me and is a positive element.

Gold, to me, represents investment in our highest self. Hard to earn but worth keeping for the rest of your life. Gold is not greed to me, it symbolizes healthy aspiration that doesn't settle for lesser objectives.

Teeth remind me of my cat nipping when they don't want to be petted anymore. My cat loves me

but communicates. So teeth, for me, feel like healthy boundaries.

A thing for kidnapping princesses—well, that could be fun. Maybe I steal them away to give them an adventure, teach them self-respect, shower them with self-reliance, give them a taste of aspiration, and then send them home. Kind of like I do in real life every time I visit home and shower as much empowering adventure on my teenage sister as our parents allow.

See? Same textures, fresh soul.

Slow down. Insist on attaching personal meaning to each detail and symbol. Find the story only you can tell.

CONCLUSION

Anything that breaks the traditional interactions between humans and dragons will generate a fresh plot. And that raises a wonderful question.

What percentage of our time, in real life, do we spend legitimately at war? We live in a new era. A largely peaceful era. Stories of people fighting to the death were relatable in eras where the average family expected tribal skirmishes, draft notices, and family feuds—at least one fight to the death in their lifetime.

That's not our era. Our era is trying to make sense of loneliness, wealth inequity, communal identity crisis, advertising overload, depression, political systems designed for a pre-tech world, and so on. We have a lot of problems, but we can't solve any of them with swords.

What do you want your reader to walk away thinking about or feeling after reading your story? Do you realize how deeply readers take your stories to heart?

When once-avid readers walk into a bookstore, look around, and walk out again without buying anything, it's because the average story buffet our industry produces doesn't speak to their problems anymore. We're not providing reasonable role models who help them make sense of today's emotions.

The girls who grew up giggling over dragon books have grown up. They have grown-up problems.

Love or the lack thereof, kids or shaken dreams about kids, jobs that ask too much, mortgages or rent, dreams that feel increasingly unlikely, time that's passing too fast, bodies that are betraying them, minds that aren't as sharp as they used to be.

When these grown-up dragon fans pick up a dragon book, yes, they're seeking a little escapism. But not total escape. They still love their spouse, their kids, their work, their home. They have no intention of walking out on it all.

They're looking for something that rekindles childlike delight while simultaneously speaking to today's array of "Geez, how do I handle this?"

They need plots that suggest solutions other than the modern but overused, "No prince is coming so be badass alone." For a married woman, hell yeah, the prince is still coming. But he/she needs you to be strong on your own until they get there.

There is no excuse for a dragon & knight & princess story fixed by the swing of a blade. Not in our era.

What are the people around you struggling with, really?

Ask your fans and friends what they're stuck on in real life. What are the bottlenecks keeping them from happiness? What sort of weapon will bring relief to THAT problem? Where can they get one?



What are the people around you struggling with, really?

When you research, don't just dig into medieval technology. Dig up scientific journals and ask what today's top experts are discovering about happiness and courage, health and love... whatever you care about and whatever people need, because real life is the original muse.

- Laura Crenshaw

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