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Free Writing Friday

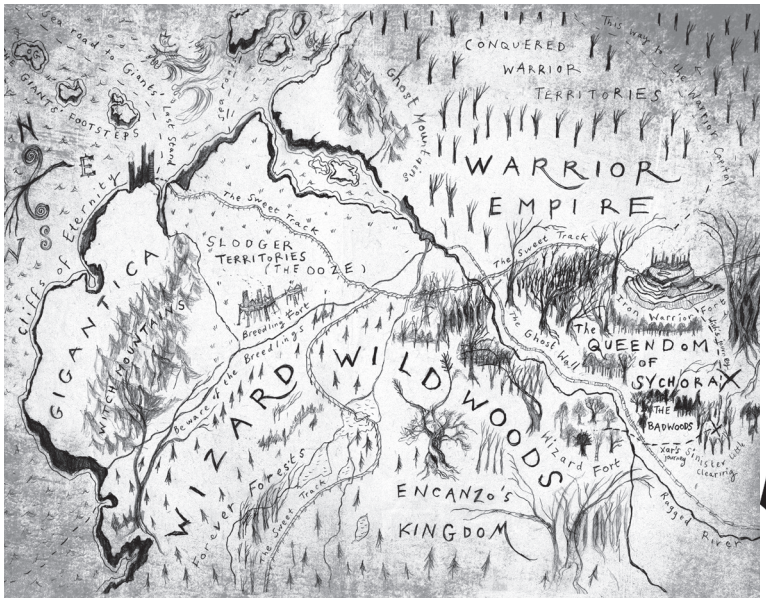
THREE WRITING TIPS

Tip one: Writing is like telling a really big lie

The more detail you put into your writing, and the more you base it on a tiny grain of truth, the more it comes alive in your reader's head. The example I use for this tip is from *How to Train Your Dragon*. If I say to you, 'Gobber has a big red beard', you can see the image in your head a bit, but not very well. If I say that, 'Gobber has a beard like exploding fireworks', or, 'Gobber has a beard like a hedgehog struck by lightning', you can see the image much more clearly. An extension to this is to think about your senses when you're describing. If you use words that encourage your reader to smell, hear, taste, see or touch, then your story is more compelling.

Tip two: Research is a boring word for something REALLY exciting

If you're stuck for where to start a story, then surprising facts about the real world can give you loads of ideas. For example, I read somewhere that Vikings trained cats for battle, because when you're sword-fighting an opponent, it's very difficult to sword fight when a cat is attacking your head. This gave me an idea that I then put in one of my books (*How to Fight a Dragon's Fury*). Many of my dragons in *How to Train Your Dragon* are based on extraordinary fish: for example, the Monstrous Strangulator Dragon is transparent, like a Barrel-Eye fish. *For The Wizards of Once*, I did a huge amount of reading about Ancient Britain: the Iron Warrior Fort is the same shape as an Iron Age Hill Fort, and the ancient forest Kingley Vale in Sussex gave me the setting for the Wildwood. Both history and the natural world are full of unbelievable facts and questions that you can base stories on.

Tip three: Draw a map of your imaginary place

A map is a very useful starting point for a story. Many great books begin with a map – *Treasure Island*, for example, or *Peter Pan*. I use maps, too for every new world. Draw a map of your imaginary place. Give it boundaries, which can be either sea or land, and give it place names. How long would it take to get from place to place? Are there any obstacles? Maps encourage you to think about your characters too, because as soon as your settings have names, you start to wonder who lives there.