

6-2016

J4CK MERED34TH

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JACK MERED34TH

A Project
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts
in
Creative Writing:
Fiction

by
Edgar Hernandez

June 2016

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Approved by:

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ABSTRACT

ESCRIBO ERGO SUM is an analysis of my writing methods, and it seeks to understand the meaning and purpose behind my novel, J4CK MERED34TH. Through this explorative piece, I create parallels between my own life and my work in order to show a much closer history and context for the novel. In it, I ultimately conclude the importance of identity and its acceptance in my writing process.

J4CK MERED34TH follows 19-year-old gamer and hacker Jack Meredith in a near distant future in which virtual reality has been achieved. After a small routine job, someone breaks Jack's security and steals his identity. This novel seeks to explore the concept of identity and its importance through Jack's journey as he fights to regain his identity.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To my mother, who taught me how to read. To my father, who encouraged me to be creative. To my brother, who convinced me I was smart enough for college. To my professors, friends, and all who reassured me and told me never to give up.

Thank you.

I will never stop.

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STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

COGITO ERGO SUM

When I look back at my life, I would love to be able to point out exactly what made me start writing. Writers, both famous and unknown ones, tell a similar story. They began at a young age. They all read and consumed *literature* as if driven by literary gluttony. They read Charles Dickens or Hemmingway. That is not my story. I didn't read what people call "literature." Hemmingway was as foreign to me as Haruki Murakami is to most Americans. But more importantly, I didn't do any of those in English for nearly half of my life.

I guess my history with writing and reading starts with me at my grandmother's house in Mexico. I played with building blocks. They weren't Legos or of a name brand. My mother had purchased them off a small shop at the end of our street. They barely fit together and held on to each other. Yet, I loved them.

They had huge letters on them, and my mother used them to teach me how to write and read. She sat on the ground with me, ignoring that she might be getting her business suit dirty from kneeling my grandmother's old dirty carpeted floor. She focused on teaching me, and I focused on learning.

Taking one block, she set the H first, and followed it by an E. She spelled out our last name and asked me to read it out for her. Happy to please, as any three-year-old would, I said my last name, "Hernández."

I would spend the following weeks spelling out different words, especially my last name for her. She would later start teaching me how to hold a pencil and form words on paper. It would become my obsession. Even when the symbols on the page had no meaning, she would praise them as poetry, and I would make more. The desire to scribble words on the page in order to please engrained itself into my subconscious.

When I turned four and entered preschool in Mexico, I was thrown into the advanced classes. It was not because I was brilliant or gifted. The professors just separated the literate kids from the illiterate ones. Instead of teaching us the very basics, we started writing and reading things that were a little more advanced. We formed sentences.

For Mother's Day, I wrote my first letter. For Father's Day, I wrote my first short story, a small paragraph composed of three sentences. Both of my parents kept some of this juvenilia and claim that I was always meant to be a writer. They swear it was obvious and that I would be like Gabriel Garcia Márquez.

If I left the rest of the story out, my writing narrative would be indistinguishable from the others. In all honesty, part of me wishes that is where the story ended. I wish my parents fostered this creativity in me, pushing me to become a writer. If they had done so, maybe learning to write would not have been a war.

Time is not kind. Jobs are lost. Jobs are gained. Parents get divorced, and families move to other cities. Some move to other countries.

That year in the small preschool in Mexico was my only year in a Mexican school. The summer I turned five, we moved to the United States. My father managed to get a much better job for the city of El Centro in California, and that meant we could afford to live on “el otro lado,” as we called the United State.

The moment the door shut behind me in kindergarten, my entire world changed. I held onto my backpack, scared and confused. I was prepared to go to school unlike many of the kids in the classroom. Many of them cried. A few ignored the teacher and ran around. I was an outsider before class begun.

The building was not ancient and made of concrete. It was new and advanced. The desks were not engraved by my predecessor. The metal legs on them weren't rusted and scratchy. They were brand new. Everything was brand new.

But when class began, the nuances in the objects around me ceased to matter. The room was not the only difference. Everyone spoke in a different language. This wasn't my world anymore.

I shut down. The teachers thought I was mentally challenged. My parents assured them I wasn't. I even served time in a special class, wasting my time and playing with building blocks. Eventually they realized the mistake. Apparently, not being able to speak English wasn't a disability. I was moved to a different class and taught me in Spanish.

It was too late by then. I had already spent too much time in isolation, and I couldn't really find the love for school or learning anymore. I distanced myself from education.

I failed fifth grade on the same year my parents split. Court and money stole their attention. My apathy towards school increased. Moreover, I guess no one realized that teaching a kid in Spanish all the way through fourth grade and then chucking them into an English-only class was a bad idea.

My father, infuriated that his son was going to be held back a year, fought the school. He was not going to accept such dishonor. Somehow, he forced the school to place me in an intense English summer program.

Most of the kids were younger by a couple of years, but the professor did not differentiate. She had us read and memorize nursery rhymes. I hated it. I wasn't a baby. Why would a ten-year-old want to sing along "Three Blind Mice?" It hurt my ego.

Instead, my attention lay on the big tomes on the back of a room. On a small shelf, the teacher kept what she called "advanced reading" books. They were meant for the students who were already fluent in English. I locked my sight on them. I wasn't going to read baby books. No more *Where the Wild Things Are*. I was going to read the advanced books.

I discovered *Harry Potter* on that shelf. I couldn't read it beyond the first couple of pages. I knew it was about a kid who lived in a closet. I knew he didn't belong. But, the language made it difficult for me to read far enough to see him

open his letter. I didn't have an option though. I *had* to read the longer books. By the end of the summer, I saw Harry wave goodbye at his friends, forced to return to his aunt and uncle's after an amazing year at Hogwarts.

There was something about Harry that I related to. It wasn't the abuse. My parents never mistreated me beyond threatening me with "el gancho". It was the difference in Harry's world. He didn't belong to the normal human world. He belonged to the *wizarding world*. It made me feel that learning English was like learning magic.

Like the mythical skeleton key, English opened an infinite amount of doors to other worlds. Other things beyond books existed. I could finally understand what the "Power Rangers" said on television. Now I knew why they fought the monsters. In comics, Spiderman taught me sarcasm. I was ecstatic I no longer had to invent my own dialogue in video games. I could read it aloud and understand it. Video games actually had a plot.

My language improved as I pushed through obstacles. I fell in love with what people call "nerd media." I identified with it. I was like Peter Parker, an outcast. I wanted to be Spiderman. I was like Superman, the alien. I even showed people my "resident alien" card to prove I was one.

In the seventh grade, a teacher showed me *Ender's Game* by Orson Scott Card, and I immediately fell in love with the series. I was also Ender Wiggin, living an isolated life in battle school.

My focus changed as I grew, and I discovered a lot more nerd media. I found Japanese Anime, Light Novels, and MMOs (massive multiplayer online games) thanks to the internet. I became an absolute *geek*.

Maybe it the truth is that I felt connected to a lot of the characters in these stories. Those mediums always depict the marginalized, the foreign, or the weird. Those things fit like Legos in my life. Even within a primarily Mexican community, I was one of the few who were actually born in Mexico.

Eventually, I started thinking, “what if I made my own stories?” I loved comics. I loved animation. I loved books. Why not? I spent the rest of middle school jotting random things on my notebooks. I ruined the corners of all my journals and school books with flip book animations of stick figures acting out the fight scenes from my stories. I sketched characters. I drew maps. I wrote down plots and summaries. I created worlds.

From there, it all developed towards writing. It was the most logical. There was something about it that gave me the ultimate pleasure. On hindsight, I believe it might be something planted by my mother when I was a child. It could be that same childish desire to please others. Regardless, I focused on writing, and that ultimately inspired me to become a writer.

I wanted to write the things that I read. I wanted to tell the stories I ate up. I wanted to contribute to the rest of the geeks. It was like giving back to the nerd gods for helping me out when I needed it the most.

That history sums up the purpose and the goal behind my thesis, *JACK MERED34TH*. If placed next to one of the books that I read and loved as a child, it fits right in.

Like with Ender Wiggin, Peter Parker, or Harry Potter, Jack Meredith—the protagonist in *JACK MERED34TH*—comes from a troubled past. He’s gone through a lot. His isolation drew him into a world of video games and the dark areas of the internet. Over time, he became obsessed with the idea of names and what they meant online. As any gamer knows, your gamer tag—the alias you use when you play—is the most important thing in the world. Since he had zero recognition from his family and friends, he becomes obsessed with finally gaining recognition from the people online.

Fast forward five years after he’s run away from home, sustaining himself by selling hacked video game accounts, and other cracked software in the black market in “FreeNet,” this novel’s version of a virtual reality internet. He’s a 19-year-old about to make e-sport (the world of competitive gaming) history. Suddenly, his account is stolen, and he finds himself trapped in a whole plot that’s beyond himself.

When I think of a story, I tend to think of the protagonist first. I try to ask, “why them,” “what makes them special,” or “what sets them apart?” It’s all part of my personal writing process. It sends me back to when I was younger and reading these books about similar protagonists. All of these books always had a character I could identify with.

Peter Parker was different than everyone else. Ender was thrown out of this world, and Harry Potter was literally from another one. Axel, from Jules Verne's *Journey to the Center of the Earth*, is your average young man. They all have the same thing in common. They're no different than any other nerd. It allows the audience to project onto the character. It lets them think, "this could happen to me."

Character is extremely important within this medium. In genre, however, its goal is not to make something new or blow anyone's minds with how different they are. They aren't even really supposed to challenge a reader. On the contrary, the protagonist must be someone like the reader, a person that they can identify with. And to this audience, it generally is someone who lives out in the margins. It's that nerd living in the basement. It's that kid who runs down the hall every morning in order to avoid the bullies.

That's why Jack is a gamer, and someone not extremely popular in the real world. That's why he develops lust for fame and recognition. It's all that a person in his position generally cannot have.

But, as with any other book within this genre, other aspects matter too. As I mentioned, when I moved from Mexico and into the United States, there was a shift in my world, another thing in common with science fiction and fantasy.

Connecting to a character is helpful for the reader, but genre often asks for something to be different: the world. The difference in setting—that magical landscape in *Harry Potter*, space in *Ender's Game*, or the center of the world in

Journey to the Center of the Earth—hooks the reader. It allows them to see and feel how a difference in location, time, or plane of existence can open their life to infinite possibilities. Like English opened the door to nerd culture, the setting in science fiction and fantasy opens the world to infinite more worlds in genre. It gives the reader hope that they can find where *they* belong.

When Gandalf picks up Bilbo, and tells him to come along in a huge adventure, Bilbo is reaped from his world and led into places he could only dream about. In *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe*, the four kids walk through the closet and into Narnia, a world unlike anything they've ever seen. There, even four kids escaping the war can be kings and queens. Although a form of escapism, these different and wonderful places also help the reader—the marginalized— experience something they understand and enjoy. The difference in setting ultimately helps them understand and even enjoy where they might be in life.

In J4CK MERED34TH, I attempt to create a different world through “FreeNet,” a virtual reality place where Jack can be anything he wants. In there, he's the best hacker, an elite member of the hacktivist group “Level-6”, and an MLG (Major League Gaming) star. In contrast, he's just an underweight 19-year-old in the real world.

Although it's not exactly “traditional” in a sense, I'm attempting to make “FreeNet” function like the fantasy realm that all of these characters I've mentioned live in, with the real world constantly reminding Jack what he's

missing as he tries to get his account back. For this reason, I've put a lot of effort into world creation, a paramount pillar within science fiction. One of the hardest aspects of writing for this genre is presenting a world that is both believable and fantastical. The writer must be weary when crafting it. Going too far and making it to unreal can lead the reader to lose their suspension of disbelief. For example, if the author makes a science fiction world too fantastical, the hardcore audience might lose interest. If the author makes it too hardcore, filling it with jargon and science fact, the casual audience is lost.

Therefore, in order to avoid this, I studied several writing guides by major science fiction and fantasy authors. Primarily, I focused on *How to Write Science Fiction & Fantasy* by Orson Scott Card, given how big of a name he is within the genre, and I believe I've managed to create a perfect balance. The world of *J4CK MEREd34TH* follows as much of the advice I could find and study, and I believe it is stronger than any of my work as a consequence.

Science fiction and fantasy novels, video games, and Japanese animation were all big influences in my writing. But I must admit, they aren't the only tidal forces active on my work.

After graduating from high school, I was a man on a mission. If I was really going to give back to the nerd community, I had to make sure I was going to be the very best. On 2007, I left for college in order to study English and writing.

Slowly, the academia modified and shifted my interests. In there, I discovered that the nerd culture wasn't the only thing out there. It wasn't all just science fiction and fantasy. I found that the heart in the stories I loved and held dear were timeless. Other people had written similar ones; they just had different backdrops.

The beauty in the language of the Romantic period hypnotized me. The Victorians taught me the importance of honor and the power of a name. In American literature, I learned how realism was extremely effective at making a point. Naturalism lectured me in the philosophical battle between people and nature. College gave me literature.

Slowly changed, my writing morphed into literary writing, often focusing on some core political issue. I wrote stories about drugs, corrupted government, and racial politics.

During my senior year in college, I rediscovered magic realism, a genre I had slowly forgotten from my Spanish literature classes. I focused on imitating the greats, taking ideas from Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *Cien Años de Soledad* and some Hispanic films like Guillermo del Toro's "Laberinto del Fauno." That sparked the creation of many other works, including some short stories that my professors claimed were the best things I had ever written, which included "Thy Fearful Symmetry," a story about a Mexican boy who discovers a talking tiger at a circus.

The combination of praise—and classroom requirement of literary fiction—eased the transition towards a new attitude. Rather than aim for the production of the nerd media I loved, I wrote literary material.

My reading habits also changed. No longer did I read popular Japanese light novels or anything from “Star Wars.” Instead, if I was going to read Japanese novels or science fiction, they were going to be literary ones. I read *Kafka on the Shore* by Haruki Murakami. Neil Stephenson and William Gibson took over my life because they taught me that it was possible to fuse science fiction with the literary work I was conditioned to love. Philip K. Dick’s work also became a stronghold within my influences, his novel *Do Android’s Dream of Electric Sheep* one being one of many.

In my last year as an English major, I redoubled my efforts, taking extra classes, and forcing my adviser to wave off overload courses, all in order for me to get a second major, one in literature. By the time I graduated, the focus of my work had transformed. I started writing stories that I considered of literary worth, aiming to hit that sweet spot these other major authors achieved.

With a major in literature and a major in writing, I moved on to the next logical step, applying for an English graduate degree in literature. In it, my training in literary work grew exponential. I explored the English canon, developing a taste for American realists and naturalists. Victorian era writers taught me character, setting, and image while contemporary authors taught me the value of complex plot and characters.

My Masters in English awoke something in me that had remained asleep for nearly two decades: the desire to write in order to learn. I desired value in what I wrote. My writing could not just be another comic book to be thrown aside once finished. It had to be something that remained in the reader's mind and soul, something that changed and improved them. I wasn't going to write junk food. I *had* to write the equal of French cuisine.

Before that, I had not really considered an MFA in Creative Writing. My professors had recommended I enter a Ph.D. program in Composition Theory or American Literature, both of which still appeal to me. However, the thing that awoke in me, that desire to improve as a writer took me in a different direction. I wanted to work on my craft again. I wanted to go back and write in order to further people's thoughts.

That was my goal when I began the MFA at CSUSB, and the first draft of *JACK MERE34TH* reflected that thought (back then a much different novel named *Jack Meredith: A Novel*). I desired to write something literary in fashion, which reflected the new idea of what true literature was.

I struggled to write that way throughout my first year, and I slowly began to discover something about my persona, something that would ultimately become the core theme in my novel. As much as I wished to write something literary, the work always lost a meaningful aspect inside of it; it lost *passion*.

Still, I attempted to write in this mode. Countless of hours were spent and wasted trying to fit a square peg into a circular hole. So as much as I fought to

write something literary, which I artificially placed on a pedestal for no good reason, I failed. To clarify, however, it wasn't that I failed according to others. Everything was internal. In reality, I failed myself.

As I mentioned in my opening narrative, I came from a different rebellious background. I hated everything considered academic, so my external influences were not Murakami or Philip K. Dick. My true influences were comics, video games, cartoons, and commercial fiction. I grew up with the *Star Wars*, *Ender's Game*, *Harry Potter*, *Spiderman*, *Superman*, *Naruto*, and *Bleach*. Why was I pushing them away and lying to myself?

I was trying to write a style I had learned as an adult in order to appease that sense of "what has worth in literature," and I failed to embrace the other part of me. The two dichotic natures were ripping me apart.

By refusing to take my "nerd" background, and the original idea that got me writing, I fundamentally broke part of myself, and that put me into a state of depression. Here I was, in the middle of my MFA in Fiction Writing, which should be helping me become the writer I wanted to be, undergoing an existential crisis. Inside of me, I wanted to write commercial fiction. I wanted to take those original stories that I loved so much, and write stories like them. However, a different part of me denied that, deeming them juvenile and of little academic worth. Nagaru Tanigawa's *The Melancholy of Haruhi Suzumiya* was not literary like *1Q84* by Haruki Murakami. *Star Wars* was not *Childhood's End* by Arthur C. Clarke. Those

novels were juvenile and intended to be pure entertainment. Popcorn to be eaten before the actual movie started.

I wish I could say that I knew about the two paradigms in my head waging an internal war as I started writing the second version of *JACK MERED34TH*. The truth was, I decided to say, “screw my desire for the literary,” and gave up on it. Over the summer, moving on to the second year of my MFA, I experienced one of the worst moments of depression in my life. I stopped writing. I stopped reading. In a way, I stopped functioning because of the one thought: why should I write if I can’t write something of worth?

The war in my head peaked, and I slowly went back to my old habits, something I hadn’t done since I started college. I watched and consumed media I had deemed juvenile and pointless. I read Ernest Cline’s *Ready Player One*. I devoured Kevin Hearne’s *The Iron Druid Chronicles* series. I even re-read some of Tanigawa’s *Haruhi* series. My entire library of Japanese “light novels,” although still a guilty pleasure, more than doubled.

By the end of the summer, the war in my head ended, with one side clearly winning. If I couldn’t write something of worth, I wanted to write something alike what I consumed. After all, I had just spent a small fortune on that type of media, really taking a toll on my savings.

The thought sent me back to the first day in my MFA Workshop when Professor Felicia Luna Lemus asked us, “what is it that you want people to say about your writing?” Being the pretentious student I am, I answered, “good.” I

thought a single word answer would be better than shouting “I want a Pulitzer!” On hindsight, I think that was not pretentious at all. It actually came from that part of me that had laid dormant throughout college and into my graduate program.

That part of me did not care about changing the world. It cared about one thing, the same thing I had entered college for, and the same thing that really made me write. I wanted to create the same media I loved. I wanted to write something people would enjoy and call good. I didn’t want that Pulitzer. I see how it would be nice to win awards, but that has never been my goal. I desire something people will pull out of the shelf, read, and enjoy. I wanted to write for the sake of everyone’s entertainment.

When I realized that, I threw away the previous failed versions of my novel. It was not that I could not write literary work. It was that my subconscious did not work that way. It wanted to write something I would bring home after a trip to Barnes and Noble, so that is exactly what I set out to write.

I began my word blitzkrieg. I wrote something the young “me” would have enjoyed while growing up, and I succeeded in completing the novel, something I had never done in my life. At the end of three months, I had the first complete draft of J4CK MERED34TH, a science fiction novel about a teenager who is suddenly thrust in a very adult world and forced to face his own mortality.

This whole fight is reflected in my thesis, but it *gives* it depth. In a way, even though I struggled with the whole concept of purpose, I ultimately found

something I had been told by many writers: “your ‘self’ will come through in your writing.” Now I know that I shouldn’t have worried too much about the purpose of my writing. Meaning would eventually come through on the page on its own.

I’m not sure how the subconscious works. I cannot claim to be a psychologist any more than any other English major who studied psychoanalytical criticism. However, as I wrote *JACK MEREDITH*, that academic side of me, the one that saw no merit to the action, forced its way into the story as a particular character.

Although the novel is named after the protagonist, Jack Meredith, the novel also has another character who plays a major role in the story: Ashley. While I read the novel again, she told me what her true role in the story was. I could not believe I had missed that as I wrote the first draft.

In short, Ashley is that part of me, the academic one that constantly demands work to have meaning and purpose behind it. Jack functions as that other part of my persona. He represents everything I consider juvenile and thus without worth. For that reason, the novel’s plot has Jack spending a lot of time trying to get his identity back, something the other characters keep telling him to ignore. However, to Jack, that identity comes packed in with his reputation and identity. He doesn’t only want his name back. He wants his *life* back. It represents all of his time playing video games and hard work.

Throughout the novel, Ashley keeps trying to get him to see the things that she believes matter the most. She is involved with the actual events that led to

much more “real” consequences, such as the death of other characters and the dangers everyone faces. Therefore, this novel’s story is my own background and development, mirroring my process as a writer. The protagonists fight each other in the novel the same way my literary critic persona fights my nerd persona.

Ultimately, the novel ends at a type of standstill. There is no right answer. The games and the reputation matter as much as anything else. They matter because they matter *to him*. Of course, Ashley is not wrong either. What she holds as important remains important for the same reason as Jack’s. It matters to him. Thus, the novel ends with both characters realizing neither world is exclusive. Both the online world and the physical world are as important as the other because they’re interconnected. Without one, the other could not exist.

Moreover, each of these worlds defines the other character. Without those worlds, the characters would not exist. Jack’s world is really the online one. That is where he grew up, and the world that has the most meaning to him. At the same time, Ashley has a much stronger connection the physical world, which makes her more cognizant of that world’s immediate issues. And through each other, the characters both learn of the importance of the other’s world, growing as people.

Somewhere online, I read the smartest words I’ve ever read: “Write for yourself.” I don’t know whose words I’m necessarily stealing, but I like to believe that *JACK MERED34TH* was written for that young “me” back when I was

discovering Peter Parker, Ender Wiggin, and Harry Potter. I want to write something people like me would enjoy.

In a near epiphany, I realize that I receive a sense of gratification from creating something that others can enjoy. It is similar to when I wrote down my name with building blocks. I did it in order to please my mother. I believe that my job as a writer is to write something that is ultimately *fun*. My work is something that makes me and others happy.

Once, during my undergrad, one of my professors asked me: “Why do you write?” It was a weird question at first, but I knew the answer. I write because I want to give people a story that they can identify with. I want the reader to find comfort, entertainment, and meaning in that world. But most importantly, I want the reader to find themselves just like I found myself in the stories I read while growing up.

I think it all comes down to a slightly modified version of a famous quote by Rene Descartes: I write therefore I am. A writer can worry about purpose all they want. They can try to write the greatest novel ever written. They can even try to write something that will change the world. However, if it is not something natural to them. The only thing they’re going to do is spill blood on the page. That path will only turn their lives into the darkest of nightmares. It is, in the end, a path to self-destruction.

That is why it is important for the writer to embrace whatever really fuels them. Rather than focus on something they're not, they should focus on what they *are*. It's about accepting yourself.

You could say that was—and is—my journey. Writing *JACK MERED34TH* was an adventure of self-discovery. And in the final act, right before the curtains closed on stage, I finally accepted myself and my purpose. I write what I love. *Escribo Ergo Sum*.

APPENDIX
J4CK MERED34TH