

AUTHORS

Eight Authors Who've Written Themselves Into Stories

Randee DawnWed Sep 20, 2023 10:00am | [4 comments](#) | [Favorite This](#)

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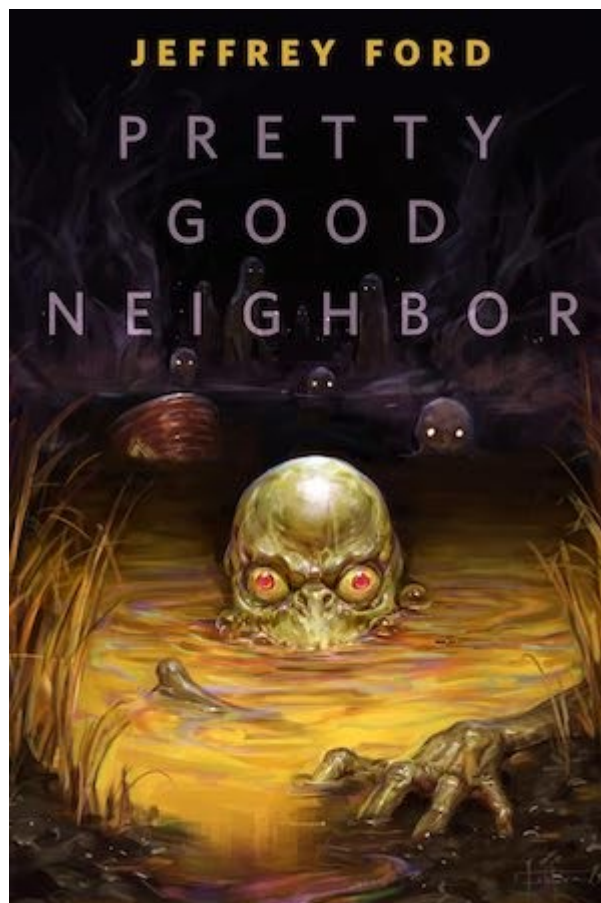
Character names can be one of the toughest challenges for an author. How to find one imbued with meaning? One that stands out? One that feels personal, yet unique? Well ... how about just using your own name? In more cases than you might expect, that's what authors do: They put themselves, under their own names, into their stories. It doesn't necessarily happen often, but it is common enough that there's a term to describe it: "self-insertion." And it's a long, time-honored tradition; back in the late 1300s, Chaucer included himself as not just a chronicler but one of the characters in *The Canterbury Tales*.

Most authors will agree that there's a bit of themselves in every one of their stories, but it's quite something different to be a named character in your own text. What do you do with

yourself in your own story? Just sneak in for a brief cameo? Reveal yourself as a godlike persona? Could you kill off your fictional self?

All of those things happen, and have happened—just check out these eight examples of authors who were able to script how their story ends, at least on paper.

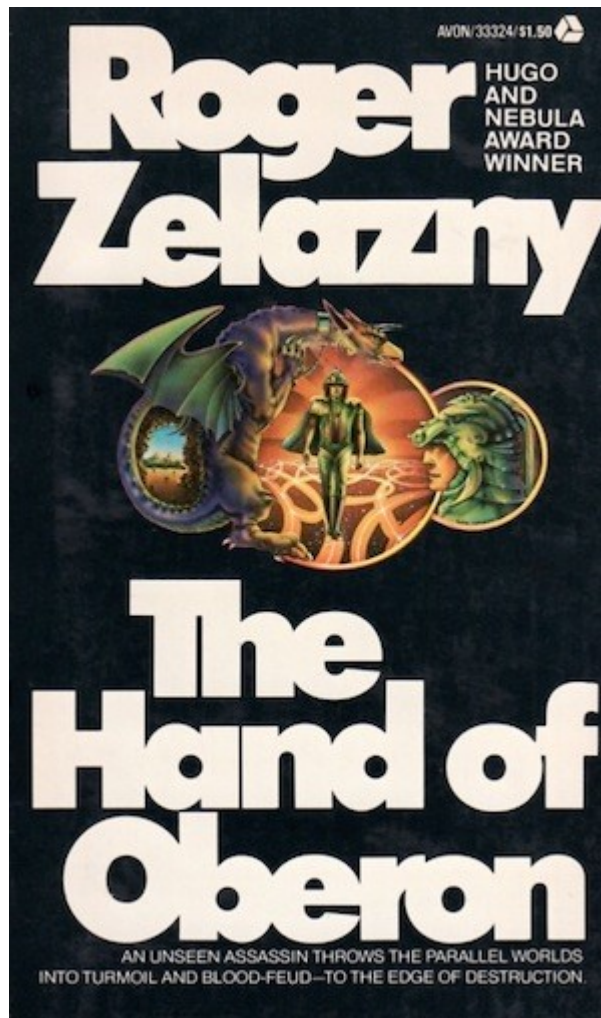
Jeffrey Ford — “[Pretty Good Neighbor](#)” (2023)



We reached out to Ford via email—initially, he says, he “ripped this technique off” initially from author Isaac Bashevis Singer, because “it makes the speculative more convincing and the telling more powerful.” Ford has used the technique since the 1990s, but says it appears in “only about 25 [of my] stories out of close to 170.” But he goes one further, as in stories like his recent contribution to Tor.com, “Pretty Good Neighbor” – he also includes his wife Lynn. Why? “She’s my hero in real life, and you couldn’t ask for a more wonderful character – fierce, fearless, loyal, an adherent of reason, and a good person.” Other recent examples of Ford directly including himself (usually as “Jeff”) or Lynn include “Beautiful Dreamer,” “Monkey In the Woods” and “The Match.” As for what prompts his self-inserts, Ford

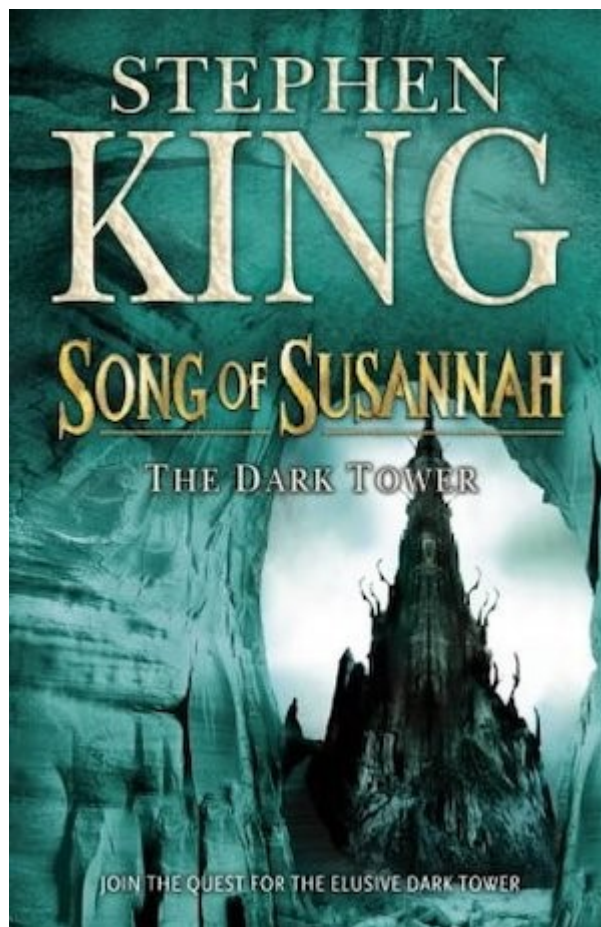
admits, “I have no idea. I just feel it as I’m writing a piece.”

Roger Zelazny — *The Hand of Oberon* (1976)



While writing the expansive The Chronicles of Amber series (two arcs of five novels each), Zelazny gave himself a passing appearance in the fourth book from the first arc, known as The Corwin Cycle. In these books, the very long-lived Prince Corwin relates his adventures and reunion with his family after a bout with amnesia. Corwin follows an investigation into a dungeon where he (and the reader) briefly meets Zelazny himself—a pipe-smoking guard named Roger described as “lean” and cadaverous.” Guard Roger tells Corwin he’s “writing a philosophical romance shot through with elements of horror and morbidity,” which actually sums up The Chronicles of Amber quite nicely. Holy *Never-Ending Story*!

Stephen King — *Song of Susannah* (2004)



King has lurked around the edges of his characters for decades. He writes so often about writers as villains and heroes, in crisis and as saviors. But in the sixth book of his Dark Tower series, King himself shows up as an adversary to the Crimson King, who tries to off the author in order to stop the story from being told. At the end of the book, a diary by “Stephen King” is included, and notes that the fictional author King died on June 19, 1999. King (the real life one) was seriously injured after a van hit him on that date. That’s some dark stuff, even for the master of horror.

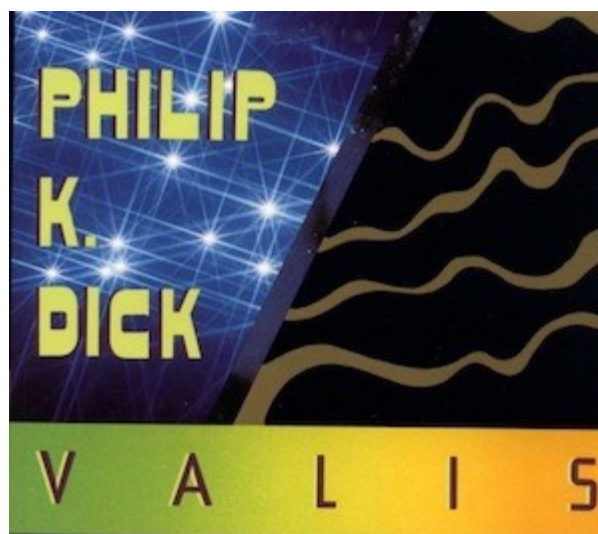
Sarah Pinsker — “*And Then There Were N-One*” (2017)

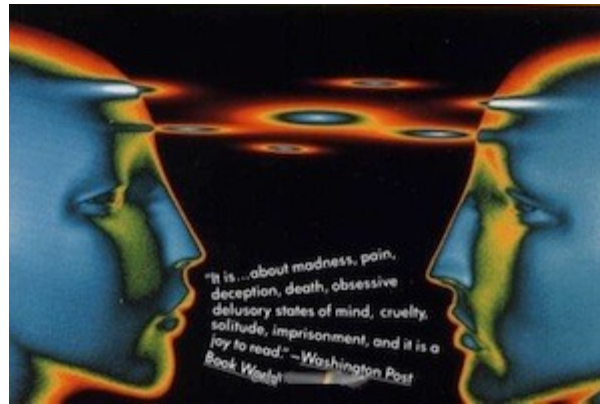




In her novella, Pinsker dives directly into self-insertion by turning virtually every character in her story into a Sarah Pinsker. There's a murder at an interdimensional convention whose guests are all versions of Pinsker from alternate timelines—and then one of them is killed off. Initially, Pinsker says the story was about a main character named Daria, but it didn't gel. "I remember the dawning horror that I knew how to make it work," she responded (via email) when asked about the story's origins. "For this story, it's not an act of vanity; it's an act of personal exploration." She also notes that "even though they all have my name, the real me only has a walk-on part." (Like Ford, she also included a few real people in the story "because I was at a retreat with them while I was writing part of the story and [I] asked if anyone wanted to be killed off in a story.")

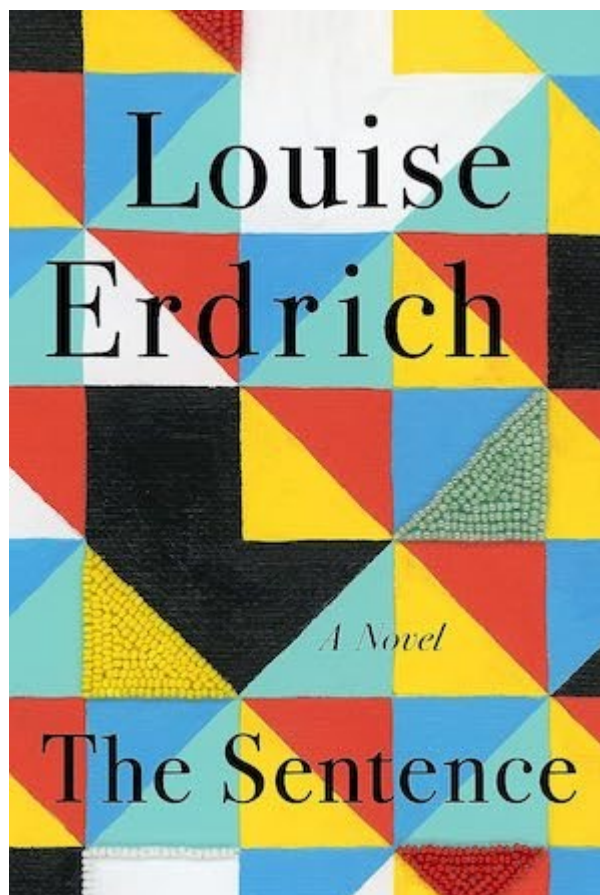
Philip K. Dick — *VALIS* (1981)





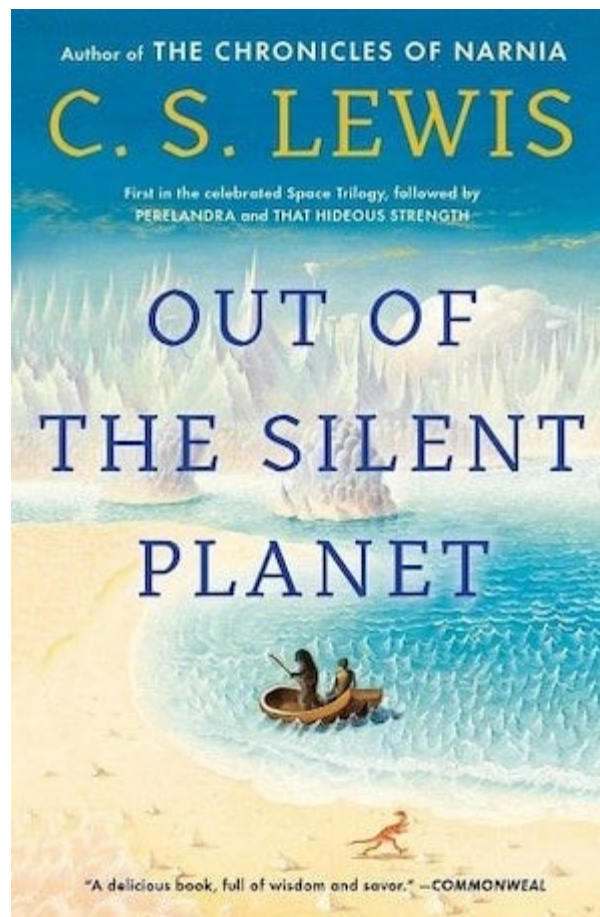
All you Horselover Fat fans, come gather round for the trippy majesty that is *VALIS*. Philip K. Dick is a narrator, a character, *and* there's a character named after him—Horselover Fat. And as Dick lets the reader know early on, “Horselover Fat” is a combination of the Greek meaning of Philip (a lover of horses) and Dick (German for “fat”), so there you are. In the story Dick and Fat interact; sometimes Dick (the character) discusses Fat with the other characters, all while everyone seeks out a toddler who might be an incarnation of God. (By the end of the book, Philip and Horselover become one, which feels like destiny.)

Louise Erdrich — *The Sentence* (2021)



There's likely an entire doctoral thesis to be written as to why self-insertion is more popular among male authors. Pinsker and Erdrich are among the few women or non-binary authors who've included themselves in their works. (Prove me wrong, hive mind!) In *Sentence*, Pulitzer Prize-winning author Erdrich creates a doubled universe by telling the story of a bookstore haunted by the specter of its most annoying customer. The bookstore in question is owned by a quirky writer of a certain age named Louise...in real life, Erdrich owns Birchbark Books in Minneapolis. Louise isn't the main character—that's a former convict named Tookie—but it's an interesting choice by the author.

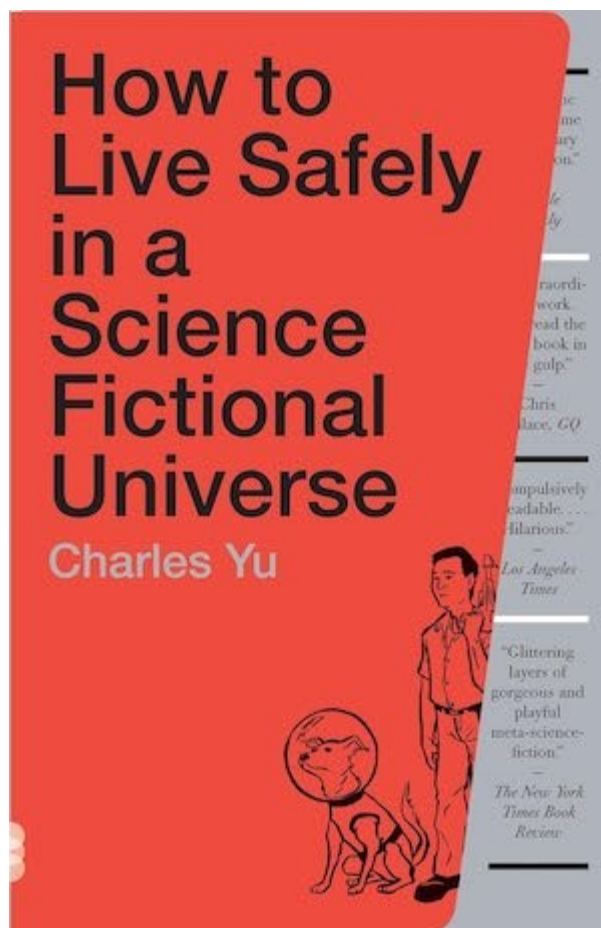
C.S. Lewis — *Out of the Silent Planet* (1938)



More than just a fantasy writer (The Chronicles of Narnia) and lay theologian, Lewis also dipped into science fiction...though there was more than a hint of fantasy elements there, too. His Space Trilogy begins with *Silent Planet* and continues with *Perelandra*, both of which feature the author as an interacting character and narrator. In the first two books, Dr. Elwin Ransom is kidnapped and sent to Mars, eventually traveling to Venus. Lewis appears at the

end of *Silent Planet* as a pal of Ransom's who goes by the doctor's house so that Ransom can tell him his tale, while in *Perelandra* he's a bit more involved, sometimes interrupting the story to offer commentary.

Charles Yu — *How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe* (2010)



It takes a lot of self-confidence to self-insert in your debut novel, but Yu barely seems to blink as he makes “Charles Yu” the protagonist in *Fictional Universe*. In the story, “Charles Yu” knows how to repair time machines and lives in his own contraption. One day, Yu sees Future Yu leave the machine and shoots him – but before Future Yu dies, he hands Present Day Yu a book. Present Yu is now caught in a loop where he has to back in time, hand his past self the book—and then get shot. And then things really start to get weird. After all, if you’re given a book about your life, what happens if you skip to the end?

What are your other favorite examples of authors who've inserted themselves into their work—we've skipped over some of the more obvious examples, so let's discuss in the comments!

Randee Dawn is the author of the funny, fantastical pop culture novel *Tune in Tomorrow*, which was a finalist in the 2023 Next Generation Indie Awards. She's also the co-editor of *The Law & Order: SVU Unofficial Companion* and co-edited the anthology *Across the Universe: Tales of Alternative Beatles*. An entertainment journalist who writes for *The Los Angeles Times*, *Variety*, *Today.com*, and many other publications, Randee is working on her follow-up to *Tune in Tomorrow* and lives in Brooklyn with her spouse and a fluffy, sleepy Westie.