

Joseph Hurtgen, M.A. English Literature, 2006

By Sarah K. Miller & Max Chambers

Science Fiction Author & Critic

"Life is hard no matter what you do, so you might as well go at it with all that you have."

Joseph Hurtgen graduated from WKU in 2006 with a master's degree in English literature. He went on to obtain a PhD in English literature from Ball State

University. Of his experience at WKU, Hurtgen said, "I spent two years reading poetry, drama, prose, and literary criticism with Dr. Endres, Dr. Hunley, and Dr. Oakes. Every time that I heard the bells at Cherry Hall ring, I thought to myself, 'That's the sound of freedom. I hope to always hear those bells.'"

Once Hurtgen finished his master's, he found it difficult to get the job he wanted. "To gain experience," he explained, "I taught adjunct courses for four years at Lindsey Wilson College and Campbellsville University. I looked around and noticed that all the full-time faculty at these schools had a doctorate." He then applied to PhD programs in English literature but experienced several roadblocks to getting accepted. "The first round, I had no idea what I was doing. To tell you the truth, I probably didn't even get all my application materials sent in correctly to those schools." The next year, he bought GRE study books and boosted his English scores. "I memorized all the GRE vocabulary words. I paid a math tutor to help me learn all the concepts that I had never cared about when I was in high school. I read articles written by professors at the universities I had selected as places to study. I redrafted letters and revised my academic writing." Because of Hurtgen's hard work, he was accepted to Ball State University.

The first year in Ball State University's PhD program was intense for Hurtgen. He discovered his academic work needed improvement; he was writing using deductive rather than inductive reasoning, and he tended to ramble. Hurtgen had to learn about how to write more focused paragraphs, so he spent hours upon hours reading fiction, theory, and literary criticism. "I read while walking. I read in the bathtub. I read when I woke up in the morning. I fell asleep with a book on my face. I made friends with a professor on campus who spent hours upon hours with me, reading my essays,



evaluating them, and coaching me to strengthen core areas: writing, literary knowledge, critical theory, argumentation, and organizational structure.”

Besides reading, Hurtgen also spent as much time as possible writing to improve his skills. “I wrote as much as I could every day. In a year I wrote 240 pages, a whole book! Every month during that year I received notes back from my professors outlining all the ways my writing was not measuring up to the professional standards of the field.” Hurtgen says that all this time spent reading, writing, and revising improved his writing immensely. While working on his dissertation, he published two academic essays, one on Olaudah Equiano and the African Imaginary and the other on archival embodiment in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, in literary magazines.

Hurtgen noted that writing a doctoral dissertation is not for the faint of heart. “As a caveat—mostly to myself—a dissertation committee does not have to grant one a PhD if they feel that its defense is weak. I read and reread my chapters, making sure I know the argument thoroughly so that I can field the questions that I will be asked.” Hurtgen successfully defended his dissertation, receiving his PhD in English literature in 2016.

Since then, Hurtgen has used his PhD to return to his passion for science fiction. He recently published the critical essay collection *[The Archive Incarnate: The Embodiment and Transmission of Knowledge in Science Fiction](#)* through McFarland in 2018. He also published his first science fiction novel in 2018, *[Tower Defender](#)*. Besides writing books, Hurtgen is the editor-in-chief of *[Rapid Transmission](#)*, a blog focusing on analytical critiques of “science fiction, and whatever’s cool.”

His advice for current students is to work hard and diligently. “Degrees don't make you successful. You make yourself successful. If it takes a degree to do that, then by all means get the degree. If you don't need a degree to do what you want, then forget the degree and go do what you want. The moral of this story is that life is hard no matter what you do, so you might as well go at it with all that you have.”

