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# Over-Crafting: What It Means & How to Avoid It

by Holly Hutchison

first printed in *Logres Weyr's Clear Skies #17*; reprinted with author's permission

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"Over-crafting" is a term I've coined over the years that describes the tendency of fans to assume that Crafters are a lot more ubiquitous on Pern than is probably the case. Once, in Pern fandom, stories tended to concentrate on dragonriders to the exclusion of "ordinary people" (which, to be fair, is what the books did, too). In fandom in general, and Logres in particular, other segments of Pernese society have begun to get more of a fair shake, but we have sort of replaced one elite group with another: the Crafts, which now get much more attention, and as a result are much more populous, than the ordinary non-Craft people who must, logically, make up the majority of Pern's population.

Participating in fandom is a long process of coming to understand Pern's society anyway -- for one thing, it involves extrapolating from scanty evidence in the published books, which leave large blanks in the overall picture; for another thing, there's really no one "right" answer, there's just people with strong opinions, who may or may not be able to convince other people to go along with their interpretations. Not everybody is a social anthropologist by nature, and that includes the woman who created this world in the first place -- so there are a lot of different answers, as many as there are different groups, and that's okay. One of the great things about Pern fandom is the ability of each group to approach the world differently, and yet for everyone still to acknowledge that we are all playing Pern.

So I'm going to discuss things from my own point of view, which does tend to be that of a social anthropologist; and as many of you have discovered, I present my views strongly. While I don't want to present this as an editorial directive, it goes without saying that I feel like this is a good "answer", certainly my preferred approach to Pern, and it's my goal to try to convince other people to agree with it.

Pern's society is not our society; you'd think that would go without saying, too, but you'd be surprised. Although Pern has a quasi-mediaeval feel (in terms of its cultural trappings and technological level), Pern is also not mediaeval Europe.

Pern has a tripartite social structure, consisting of the Weyrs, the Crafts and the Holds. Each segment of society is considered "autonomous" from the other -- which means that a consortium of Weyrleaders can't tell a Lord Holder what to do, and a conclave of Holders can't tell a Mastercraftsman what to do. Within the segments, different parts are also meant to be autonomous, but in practice, each segment has its own regulatory mechanism by which individual members can be controlled -- the Conclave of Holders, for example, or the Council of Weyrleaders. But

each segment of Pern's society has a similar hierarchical structure, starting with a central leader (Weyrleader, Lord Holder, Mastercraftsman) and then trickling down.

This is in theory. In practice, each segment relies to a greater or lesser extent on every other segment, and cooperation is imperative, and social ties develop. Holders and Crafters rely on the Weyrs to keep them Thread-free; the Weyrs rely on Holders and Crafts to supply them with the goods that they don't have time to produce for themselves in order to survive. Each Weyr is responsible for a territory, and thus we say that the Holders and Crafters that fall within that territory are "weyrbound" to that particular Weyr; Crafters are often considered "holdbound" to the Hold near which their Hall is located, too. Autonomy is good in theory, but in practice people have to get along.

Pern very much has a ruling elite which is relatively small, and a broad "commoner" base that works its tail off to support the elite. The Weyrs themselves, in totality, are an elite; at least, the dragonriders are. Dragonriders are "instant nobility". Weyrfolk who are nonriders have to work hard, of course, to keep the domestic side of the Weyr going, but probably consider themselves "above" non-Weyr commoners; and they are correct in a few ways, in terms of social status, because they are treated a bit better in the Weyr and they also reap the benefits of the largesse given to the dragonriders by the Holds. While a drudge in a Weyr may work hard, he or she never has to worry about starving when their crops fail, or having their home swept away by flood or landslide. Even if disaster does befall a Weyr, the Weyr will take care of them.

What people tend not to realize is that Crafts are supposed to be an elite as well. Crafters are specialists, doing jobs that require special training. Their expertise is rewarded by Holders and Weyrs; they wouldn't get rewarded if what they were doing wasn't special. Crafts are so special that they are given autonomous status and extraordinary social power -- their status is similar to that accorded to the medical profession over much of our world, extending beyond political boundaries (only on our world, it's in theory; on Pern, it's practice). In theory, a Crafter is answerable first to their Mastercraftsman, and only secondarily to the local political power where they live (if they live at a Lord's Hold, or at a Weyr). Given sufficient cause, the Mastercraftsman can withdraw their Craft from a settlement -- a practice we saw implemented in Moreta, at a critical juncture, when the Masterhealer withdrew the Healers from Fort Hold during the plague. This is an amazing power for the Crafts to wield, and yet necessary for them to keep from becoming exploited by local authority.

The high rank of the Crafts, and their power, and their specialized knowledge, means that most of Pern's population, the holders, are not in fact Crafters -- for the Crafts to retain their position, they must exist in contrast to another segment of society that makes them valuable. A Holder cannot control any resident Crafters (ultimately, if push comes to shove), and he cannot control dragonriders. Therefore, a Holder can't run his Hold unless he has a broad

population base that he does control and that, somehow, affords him something that he can use to balance out the power in the hands of the other two groups. That "something" is the fact that the population of the Holds outweigh that of the Crafts and the Weyrs; and that it is the holders who are the farmers, herders and fishers who bring in that vital necessity, food-- which is given to the Weyrs in exchange for protection and given to the Crafts in exchange for goods or services, since both the Weyrs and the Crafts are too busy performing their functions to devote manpower to food production.

"Wait a minute," you say. "Aren't three of the Crafts the Farmers, Herders and Fishers?"

Why, yes. Yes they are. This is another way we know that Crafts are essentially specialists, rather than the totality of practitioners of an activity on Pern. If every man who farmed on Pern was a ranked member of the Farmercraft, then the production of food would be in the hands of that Craft, not in the ultimate hands of the Holder who owns the land. That would create a very different social dynamic than what we glimpse in the books.

So, what's the problem?

Well, the problem is that early in Pern fandom, people got really excited about the Crafts-- because after all, after the dragonriders, various Crafts are the next-most romantic occupation presented in the books. After reading the Harper Hall trilogy especially, people saw the Craft experience as a parallel for the experience that the writer has gone through - college or university training. Certainly, the way it's presented in the books, it seems pretty similar -- you go someplace far from home, a community devoted to learning; you live in dormitories; you have classes all day; and you "graduate" to different ranks.

We are trapped, however, by the fact that fandom is a pretty homogenous group. We are all, broadly speaking, from a similar socio-economic-educational background; fandom is the home of overeducated young people. We equate the Craft structure with the university experience (which, with some exceptions, all of us have either had or are heading towards). And we live in a society in which, increasingly, there is a minimal educational requirement to function. We all tend to trickle into the sorts of jobs that require a minimum of a college degree; and all the people we know tend to fall into the same social stratum.

With few exceptions, we are unused to thinking about the large number of people in our countries who don't go to college, may not even finish high school, and wind up in careers that are menial or that require training on a track very different from the college model < it's call "vocational/technical training" in some high schools; or it's a job like farming that one begins learning at an early age and is more a way of life; or it's gardening, construction, or janitorial work that many people assume erroneously is "unskilled labor" for which the training is individualized and on the job.

So we tend not to stop and think about Pern's population and what they do. We tend not to keep in mind the model of

how the society works, and where Crafters fit into it. Therefore, when we are thinking about something that has to be done in a story or in developing a setting, we often don't stop to think about where that is going to fit into the overall social structure. "There's a task to be done," we say, "so there must be a Crafter to do it."

This is what I mean by over-crafting; the assumption that if something is being done, it's being done by a Crafter. The way to combat this is, first, always to keep in mind that Crafters are a small, elite portion of the population. Then re-evaluate what it is being done. Is a Crafter really necessary? What is the level of skill required? Or, how important is the task to what's going on, and do the people involved want to give control of it to somebody who owes allegiance to a Craft?

Let's take a few examples drawn from real life. Say you've got a leaky faucet. Calling a plumber is like calling a Smithcrafter to deal with it-- expensive, and possibly overkill for the job. You might try fiddling with it yourself, or asking other homeowners, before resorting to the Craft. Or, take gardening as an example. Anyone can putter around in a garden, even grow food; there are only certain instances in which you'd call in a Landscape Architect.

All of Pernese society is filled with examples like these -- situations in which there is a level that can be taken care of without a Crafter, and specialized situations that call for a Crafter's expertise.

Farming goes on all over the planet; what Farmercrafters do is more esoteric research into hybridization, growing conditions, fertilization problems, harvesting methods and farm implements -- things which an ordinary person doesn't have time to mess around with. Herders are much the same, since they have time to pursue breeding and training experiments that an ordinary person doesn't; the Herders aren't bound by the strict penalties that failure would impose on the ordinary person trying to scrape up a living.

Your ordinary Pernese can sing and teach the Teaching Ballads to their kids, without the aid of a Harper; can take care of minor injuries and illnesses without calling in a Healer; can weave rough cloth, knit, or sew and repair simple clothing without going to a Weaver; can cure hides without a Tanner's help; and can repair simple things around the hold or cot, and probably put shoes on their runners, without calling on a Smith. Holders run farms and herds and mines without having them overseen by those Crafts.

Remembering these distinctions when creating characters or writing stories helps to reinforce the portrayal of Pernese society overall -- a society with a distinct hierarchy and tension between various segments. Without emphasis on the difference between these segments, Pern becomes impossibly egalitarian and Utopian -- and Utopias can be really, really boring. While Pern's social structure isn't always pretty, the grittier we make it, the more interesting it can be. Even if you choose not to write in detail about the Great Unwashed Masses of Pern, you should always be aware that they exist, and that if you are writing

about a Crafter, you're writing about someone whose intelligence or talent gave them the ability to rise out of and above the station of commoner.

Which is a final distinction to note, and one that is often forgotten by fans. In our world, nowadays, anybody who can pay for it pretty much can go to college; no matter how bad your grades, there is always some school that will let you in. The Crafts, however, don't take everyone. They can't; they couldn't possibly support them. In our world, we have so many colleges and universities that it's impossible to keep count; and some of them have as many as 40,000 students. The Crafts on Pern are nowhere near that size; of course, Pern's population is not as big as our own, either. But the percentage of people who go on to become Crafters is probably just about the same as those who go on to become dragonriders -- very small, compared to the overall population.

There must be an awful lot of people who could become Crafters, but who don't, for the reason that their family can't spare them or afford to lose them. True Crafters in training - - apprentices -- don't seem to be charged a tuition, although we are not told if it is customary for someone entering a child in a Craft to provide a one-time "gift" or bounty to the Craft in token of support of their child. That means that the Craft must support all of its students; and thus there is a practical limit on how many they can support. (As we saw in "Dragonsinger", Crafts sometimes also take on "paying students", obviously to help supplement their income; what is clear, however, is that these students don't become members of the Craft, and by inference, the apprentices don't pay or else there wouldn't be such a distinction).

It's worth keeping in mind that if you are writing about someone who becomes a Crafter, what it meant to them socially to become one -- unless they were raised within the Craft, leaving their home, the economic burdens thus imposed, and the joining of a small, elite population. The Crafts must also somehow select on the basis of ability, in order to distinguish between whom they will train and whom they won't -- the early apprentice period is probably a weeding-out period of testing an applicant's ability. What is worth remembering that there is no inevitability on Pern of someone going into Craft training; not like the inevitability and compulsory nature of the educational system on our world today.

At Logres (somehow, all these articles tend to end with an "at Logres...") we are seeing a unique confluence of two elites -- dragonrider society, and Crafters. Logres has a large concentration of Crafters, with a broad representation of all the Crafts at the Weyr -- probably a broader representation than that found in almost any other community, either Hold or Weyr, with the possible exception of Landing. The balance between the three segments of society is shifting -- the Weyrs no longer provide one essential service to the rest of Pern, protection from Threadfall; and therefore can no longer barter that service for support. The Weyr is trying to come up with alternative services to barter; and also, ways to do that support for itself. If you think about the greater Hold

population and the time its people devote to the raising/growing of food, you realize that this is a big task that the Weyr has taken on. Its elite has never had to perform such a commoner role -unless members of that elite came from the ranks of commoners themselves.

One quick and dirty way for the Weyr to come up with alternatives to Threadfighting service is for its members to become Crafters, and obtain the ability to perform other services. This is a great solution, and easy too, because many dragonriders were at some stage of Craft training before Impression caused them to put it aside. Now that the Pass is over, many of them are resuming that training. But this is a solution fraught with trouble -- think about it, as dragonriders become Crafters again, who will they owe allegiance to? Their Weyr? Or, as ranked crafters, their Craft? One possibility is that some dragonriders will "pay for" Craft training (in some way) without taking on Craft rank (and thus, oaths to the Craft). The other solution is simply for the various people involved to hope like hell that a situation never arises that causes a dragonrider Crafter to be pulled between conflicting duties (of course, such situations will arise -- thank goodness, because conflict is the root of many good stories).

But, again (in reference to the subject of this article), we can avoid over-crafting (the assumption that every dragonrider will now become a Crafter) by realizing that there are many things the dragonriders can do that don't require Craft training at all. There are many solutions to their problem of "how do we become useful in a Thread-free society?", and only one of those solutions involves the Crafts. Dragonriders can become farmers and herders and fishers without becoming Crafters; they will, in effect, become holders. Those are solutions for the riders, though, not necessarily for the dragons; some other solutions may involve using the peculiar talents of dragons as an asset -- either to assist with an already-existing task, like hunting, or to perform a task that only a dragon can do, such as instantaneous transport.

In summary, Crafting is an option, but it is not the only option. It is an option with its own imposed limitations, and therefore, it shouldn't be the default option that fandom often makes it.