

## The story behind “Sacred Ground”

Whilst my first completed novel – written in 1991/2 – was an American private eye story, I soon changed tack into a genre which better suited my influences.

In my childhood, I was a devotee of *Blake's 7*, *Star Trek*, and to a lesser extent, *Dr Who*. The books of Isaac Asimov were also imprinted on my memory. Things like *Flash Gordon's* Saturday morning episodes also fuelled my sci-fi leanings, and my choice to study Physics with Astrophysics at university did nothing to dampen this predilection.

In the 1990s, I wrote two time-travel novels. I made these available on Amazon in the 2010s, then withdrew them as, in hindsight, they feel derivative and amateurish. The political thriller plotline, and the use of the main timeline being in a near-future Earth setting, are things I returned to in my later *Enna Dacourt* series, but at most, these two books are best regarded as a writing ‘apprenticeship’.

The seeds of the book which became “Sacred Ground” were sown during an evening with a friend when a ‘what if’ question came up. This centred around a potential story focused on the fallout from a long space war.

I took this ‘what if’, pushed the stakes higher, and the idea was born.

The other key ingredient for my decision to write the book was reading Iain M Banks’ “Consider Phlebas”. I was blown away by the scale and imagination of the story, and by the style and verbosity of the prose. I was consumed by a desire to try to write in this style – something I knew would be a huge challenge. Worse case, I’d fail. Still, I had a great premise.

In hindsight, I still don’t know how, in 2003-4, I managed to upskill my writing almost overnight. I truly felt like I was channelling Banks’ style – though I know that is hyperbole – and I haven’t since succeeded in writing such florid prose. It certainly doesn’t have Banks’ sweep or invention. Still, I take heart that such a great author catalysed me into trying harder.

Though the book has been through multiple copy edits since it was first published, it retains the same feel. These edits were centred around fixing grammar mistakes and reducing the word count – trying to polish a manuscript which was written without the benefit of all the knowledge I’ve gained in the two decades since it was first drafted. I want the book to read as well as it can for the story.

The manuscript sat in my drawer from 2005 onwards. I'd queried a few agents and publishers without success, and moved on to other projects. When I became aware of the ability to publish on Amazon, without cost or risk, in 2012, I decided to take the plunge and release the book into the world.

Since then, as well as numerous reissues for copy, format and other tweaks, it's had four new cover designs, each better than the last. This book is the standard bearer for my self-publishing approach, which is to keep iterating, polishing, and employing new knowledge to give potential readers the best product.

I won't regurgitate the book's blurb or give away any spoilers, but *Sacred Ground* is set in the far future after a long interstellar war. In some respects, it's an ark story, partly it's a moral tale with religious undertones, but primarily it's a character study about people swept up in things much bigger than their own lives.

As I write this retrospective, some inspirations remain lost in the mists of time. Occasionally, however, I stumble across what could have been potential catalysts for a few of the aspects.

Chief amongst these is the movie *Star Trek V*. My book contains a quest for religious knowledge (and societal unification), and this is undoubtedly redolent of Sybok's physical and ideological journey in the movie. Within this, there are probably details, scene elements and even lines I've borrowed or homaged.

Another touchstone – which marks the book's opening – is the character Martin Riggs' aborted suicide attempt in *Lethal Weapon*. Early on, we meet a troubled MC, down on his luck and seeing no point carrying on. Still, it's a long way from a beach-set mobile home to a captain's quarters on a spaceship halfway across the galaxy...

Hidden within the book are echoes of biblical names (Rakkel for Rachel, Simeon for Simon, Geon for Gideon) and, without spoilers, these tie into the backstory. The monikers of the ships derive from the wonder of the planet's inhabitants when they started seeing – and exploring – space, e.g. Hydrogen Fire, Final Ray, Dancing Twins.

There's a pair of robots who gently bicker, a lot of loss and heartache, daring escapes, love and regret.

*Sacred Ground* was a one-off, a moment in my writing career when a few key elements came together. The early 2000s were a purple patch of creativity, but this space opera was a highlight for many reasons. I still enjoy flicking through it. It continues to stir emotions.

Yes, it's far from perfect, but I remain proud of it.