

Making Engineers Sexy

I don't know many engineers who write novels, particularly thriller novels. In fact, other than me, I can't think of any off the top of my head, and I'm not even published. There are plenty of doctors (Michael Crichton, Tess Gerritsen), lawyers (John Grisham, Scott Turow), insurance salesmen (Tom Clancy), and even a veterinarian (James Rollins). But where are all the engineers?

Dr. Paul Santi, a professor of geological engineering at the Colorado School of Mines, wrote a great article titled *On Making Engineers Sexy*, (<http://fie-conference.org/fie97/papers/1512.pdf>) which got me thinking about the image problem engineers have in popular entertainment, if you can even find them. Books, TV shows, and movies featuring engineer characters are about as common as Mensa meetings featuring Paris Hilton. There's Scotty, of course, from Star Trek, and his successor, Geordi LaForge from Star Trek: The Next Generation. All told, there are probably more engineers featured in the Star Trek canon than all other forms of entertainment combined, but I'm a big fan and even I can't remember them.

After those two examples, the list gets mighty thin. Dirk Pitt is one of my favorites, a marine engineer with dozens of adventures in the Clive Cussler novels, but he really identifies himself more as an ocean specialist and adventurer than as an engineer, so he barely counts.

Then there's the ultimate engineer, MacGyver (and his alter ego, MacGruber (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XhKdrbRW5vY>)—the guy's a friggin' genius!). Supposedly MacGyver studied physics in college, but the way he got out of sticky situations was pure engineering, so in actuality MacGyver was not a scientist. Scientists analyze. Engineers get things done. When the timer on an atomic bomb is ticking down, you don't want the scientist who knows the theoretical underpinnings of nuclear fission, you want the engineer who knows how to short it out with a gum wrapper.

So that's four engineers in fictional pop culture, not counting the dubious and embarrassing example of The Professor from Gilligan's Island.

Any others you can think of are total nerds. Which, as an engineer myself, I take as a complete insult. Sure, I've known my share of engineers who make Rainman look as extroverted as Ryan Seacrest. But believe me, there are engineers who partied just as hard as anyone else in college

(if I had a cell phone camera back then, I'd be a rich man today). So why aren't there any cool engineers saving the world from annihilation? Where is our engineering hero? Where is our Indiana Jones?

Short answer: No one wants to write stories about engineers because the conventional wisdom is that they're boring. They do the brainy work that lets the hero or heroine blast the bad guys and get the girl (or guy, depending on which way the hero or heroine rolls). Meanwhile, the engineering geek is playing World of Warcraft back in the lab, where his most strenuous activity is popping open his can of Red Bull.

The irony of all this is that, without engineers, most forms of modern entertainment wouldn't be possible. Look at any list of credits from a blockbuster action movie and you'll see it littered with engineers: sound engineers (who do you think came up with the cool sound a lightsaber makes? Which is, technically, vwinnnge.), electrical engineers and mechanical engineers (the Titanic in Titanic didn't sink by itself; it took engineers for that, both for the movie and the ship), and of course, computer engineers (think of the movie Iron Man without Iron Man actually in it).

So I, the owner of three engineering degrees that I don't even use any more, did what any good engineer would do. I tried to solve the problem by writing my own engineering hero, Tyler Locke. Locke's first adventure was in *The Ark* ([link to The Ark](#)), where he battled against a vast conspiracy to destroy the earth as we know it using nothing more than his engineering abilities and his trusty Leatherman multi-tool (<http://www.leatherman.com/>), plus enough guns and explosives to supply the 82nd Airborne. Unfortunately, my literary agent couldn't find any publishers for it (one editor rejected it because "the action was nonstop." Huh?), so I've put it up on my web site for free download. Doesn't mean it will never be published, but in the meantime, it's available for you to enjoy along with the two other books I've written (Don't worry; even though the protagonists in those are scientists, they're cool scientists.).