The Advanced Fiction Writing E-zine

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"Fiction Writing = Organizing + Creating + Marketing"

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1) Welcome to the Advanced Fiction Writing E-zine!

Those of you who have joined in the past month (more than 500 of you signed up in December), welcome to my e-zine!

You should be on this list only if you signed up for it on my web site. If you no longer wish to hear from me, don't be shy -- there's a link at the bottom of this e-mail that will put you out of your misery.

If you need to change your e-mail address, there's a different link at the bottom to help you do that.

If you missed a back issue, remember that all previous issues are archived on my web site at:
http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com/ezine

What's in this issue:

The successful novelist needs good organization, good craft, and good marketing. In this issue, we'll talk about each of these in turn.

* Most writers hate organization and therefore most writers desperately need it. Want to get more done this year than you did last year? Read my article, "Divide and Conquer."

* I'm a character-oriented writer and my friend Jeff Gerke is a plot-oriented writer. Jeff is the author of a new book published by Writer's Digest, PLOT VERSUS CHARACTER. I was delighted to learn some valuable things about writing characters from Jeff's book. Check out my interview with him, "Plot versus Character."

* If you're not yet published with a traditional, royalty-paying publisher, one of the best things you can do to help yourself break in is to go to a writing conference. To put it simply, conferences are great marketing tools. To understand why, read my article, "Those Pesky Writing Conferences."

Are you reading my blog? Check out the massively popular "Ask A Question For My Blog" feature on my web site. Every day, I answer one question in detail from my loyal blog readers. Are you missing out? Join the fun here:
http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com/blog

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2) Organizing: Divide and Conquer

You've got a whole year ahead of you. How do you plan to spend it and what do you hope to get done?

See what's on your plate . . .

If you haven't thought about that yet, take five minutes and write down on a clean sheet of paper all the stuff on your plate. Write it all down, big stuff, little stuff, and everything in between.

If you're like everyone else, you've got many things in your life besides writing. You want to get them all done, and you only have one life, so put everything on the same list. Do this now, before you read on. Get it all on paper where you can see it.

Pretty daunting, isn't it? The nice thing with writing these things down is that they're out of your head and

onto paper. So now you can focus on doing things without worrying that you'll forget something.

Map out your year . . .

For the moment, ignore all the small stuff like taking out the garbage or changing tires on the cat. Circle in red all the big things you want to do this year. Finishing the first draft of your novel, maybe. Or editing your manuscript. Conducting a search for an agent. Selling your novel. Promoting it. Probably not all of the above, but definitely one or two of them.

And certainly you'll have a few big non-writing projects on your list. Maybe you want to refinance the house or redo the back yard or take a class or have a wedding. If it's important to you and it's time-consuming, put it on the list.

Your big tasks are, by definition, big. You won't get them all done in January. Write all the big projects on a list of their own, labeled "Projects For This Year." Most of them will take weeks or months to do. Make estimates for how long they'll take, either in weeks or months.

You've now divided your year into more manageable chunks. Your goal is to conquer them, one by one. Most of them are going to take longer than you think. That's part of life. If the time estimates on your list add up to more than 8 months, then you probably won't get them all done this year.

I've been mapping out my year lately, and I have 24 projects listed. That's a lot, but the good news is that most of them should realistically take only one or two weeks, so I have a good chance of getting most of them done this year.

Map out your month . . .

Because life is unpredictable, it really doesn't make sense to try to plan out the whole year in detail. Circle the first few projects you want to get done -- enough to fill up the coming month.

Now take a clean sheet of paper and write only those first few projects on it. Your goal for this month is to knock them all off your list. If you've only got one big project and it's going to take more than a month, that's OK. Your goal for this month is to get as much of that project done as possible.

You'll also have some other smaller tasks that need doing this month. These were the "small stuff" items that you ignored on your first list. Add them to your list for this month. Keep adding tasks until the month looks full.

You've now divided your month into a set of manageable tasks. If you've done your job well, you've got a full month ahead of you, but it's doable.

For this month, I have four projects that are all related and that I want to wrap up all at the same time. I'm certain they won't all get done in January, so I've set a deadline in mid-February for the four of them as a single package. They're all on my list to work on in January, but I've also got 11 other "small stuff" things that are going to take up part of the month. Life happens.

Map out your week . . .

You can plan your week in the same way as you planned your month. Look at the list for the month and circle the big things you can finish this week, or at least work on. Also circle the "small stuff" items you want to do this week. Write them all on a clean sheet of paper of things to do this week.

For this week, I've got 13 items on my list. Some of them are five-minute tasks that were too trivial to put on the plan for the month, but they need to get done this week, so they're on the list. I've already got three of them punched out and I've got another couple almost done.

Map out your day . . .

Once you've got a To Do List for the week, it's not hard to plan each day. Pick off a few things from your week's list and add in any small-stuff items for the day. Some of these might be things you do every day, like getting the mail or tracking your time for the day or whatever.

For today, I've got 11 items on my list and 5 of them are already done. I'll probably get most of them crossed off. If not, tomorrow is another day.

If you want to get a lot done, divide and conquer. Don't try to plan all the big and all the little stuff for your entire year, (or your entire month or entire week). Things come up that you can't plan.

Plan the big stuff and let the small stuff find its way into the cracks in your schedule.

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3) Creating: Plot versus Character

I recently received from Writers Digest Books a review copy of a new book by one of my close friends, Jeff Gerke. Jeff is a talented editor with a knack for acquiring excellent novels for the various publishers he's worked for over the years. Several years ago, he launched his own independent publishing company and the two of us have spent a lot of time strategizing his marketing.

Jeff is also an excellent teacher. He and I have taught at many writing conferences over the years, and I always hear great things about him from the writers who take his classes.

In Jeff's new book, PLOT VERSUS CHARACTER, he divides the world into "plot-first" writers and "character-first" writers. I'm definitely a "character-first" novelist, so I thought that I'd learn more about plotting from him.

As it turned out, I learned more from Jeff about creating characters. The reason, I'm sure, is that writing characters comes naturally to me, so I haven't had to work at it as hard because I could get by on intuition.

I've twisted Jeff's arm into doing an interview with me about his book. Here's his blurb about himself, followed by the interview:

Jeff Gerke is the founder of Marcher Lord Press, the premier publisher of Christian speculative fiction. Under his pen name, Jefferson Scott, he is the author of six novels and three nonfiction books. Under his actual name, he is the author of "The Art & Craft of Writing Christian Fiction" and two fiction craft books published by Writers Digest Books: "Plot Versus Character" and the forthcoming "The First 50 Pages." He has worked as a staff editor for Multnomah Publishers, Strang Communications, and NavPress. He is currently a freelance editor, writer, cover designer, and typesetter. Novels he has acquired and/or edited have won the Christy Award, the ACFW Carol Award, the INDY Award, the EPIC Award, and the Foreword magazine Book of the Year Award. He was one of three finalists for 2010 ACFW Editor of the Year. Jeff is a popular teacher at writing conferences. He lives in Colorado Springs with his wife and three children.

RI: You're a plot-first novelist. How did you learn so much about creating character-based fiction?

JG: Out of desperation. I liked my first three novels, but I had this sense that my characters were, I don't know, wooden. Stereotypical. Stock characters. Shallow. It took only a couple of reviews for someone to say

something like, "The story is great but the characters are a little weak," for me to know I needed to make a change.

So I thought, "Hey, I'm a fairly smart guy. This looks like it's an area of craft I need to bone up on. I can do it." So I bought some books on character creation. But I found that they were all written by people who were good at creating characters. That's understandable, I guess. I mean, you don't get people who are bad at something to write books on how to do it. But still, none of their advice made any sense to me. It was as if it was in another language. I'd do the exercises, but I never felt like I got usable characters from them.

I then set myself a pretty risky challenge: could I write a character-driven, ensemble-cast trilogy? I had good connections with the then-editor at Barbour Publishing, and before I knew it, I had contracts to actually write this trilogy. Gak! Now what had I gotten myself into?

So I hit the bookstore to try to come up with my own system for creating characters. I ended up in the psychology section, where I found a book called "Please Understand Me II" by David Keirsey. That was my introduction to the Myers-Briggs temperaments system. I was overjoyed to find in that book what are, in essence, character cores.

But as in-depth as that information was, I quickly realized that people are more than their temperaments. There are other layers around that core. As I thought about what layers there might be, I found myself creating some realistic and differentiated characters for that trilogy I was obligated to write.

When the trilogy was done, it occurred to me that other writers might be plot-first novelists too and could maybe benefit from this system. And here we are.

RI: You've edited numerous novels for several different publishing houses. What are the rough percentages of plot-first novelists and character-first novelists and how do you handle them differently when editing their work?

JG: Whenever I teach this content at writers conferences, I explain what I mean by plot-first novelists and character-first novelists, and then I ask for a show of hands. Usually about 80% of the women identify themselves as character-first novelists and 80% of the men identify as plot-firsters. It's not 100%, obviously, and we can all think of male novelists who write wonderful character stories and female novelists who write great action stories (who "write like men," in other words).

Because the area of publishing I work in has predominately been a women's realm -- in terms of the readers and the authors -- I see a lot of character-first writers out there. But as a freelance editor I work with all kinds, and I do a lot of work for individuals, not just authors with contracts at publishing houses. So I see both.

The great thing about speculative fiction is that there's more of an even mix of male and female authors. In fact, in my current author stable I have close to a 60-40 male-female mix.

What I look for, though, is a novelist who can tell a great story AND craft wonderful characters. And that's a feat possible for both genders and both kinds of writers. But not easy for either.

RI: You're a big fan of using the Myers-Briggs classification scheme as the foundation of each character. Why is this a good starting point? Why is this not a good stopping point?

JG: I love to find people who have developed ways to classify some corner of the universe. The idea of looking at the entire human population and coming up with four main categories (and then four classes within each category) to describe them all is fascinating to me. To be able to break down something as complex as humanity into 16 main groups is very appealing to my desire to impose order on chaos.

And the "Please Understand Me II" book takes this further by describing what each temperament is like in courtship, as a parent, as a child, as a boss; what careers each temperament gravitates toward; what temperaments work best (and worst) together in marriage; and more. It is a ton of character work already done for me.

So for the plot-firster, who really has no clue what makes people tick (writers like me, for example), this is a gold mine.

But it's not enough. If you take the classification to an extreme, you can begin to think that there are only 16 personalities in the world and everyone is just a clone of one of those 16. It reminds me of the reimagined Battlestar Galactica series in which there were only 12 Cylon models.

To make characters believable and differentiated, I begin with one of the Myers-Briggs core temperaments, but then I layer on all the other things that make characters unique: appearance, natural abilities, upbringing, education, intelligence, birth order, love languages, major life experiences, and more.

RI: Novelists often talk about a "character arc." What the heck is that and why is it necessary to know in writing fiction?

JG: In my opinion, the best stories are stories about people who change. We are, ourselves, in flux and in the midst of being transformed all the time. So when we see a character change in a novel or a movie, we relate -- without even realizing it. It's possible to write fiction in which the main character doesn't change during the course of the story, but these are either stories in which other people change AROUND the main character (Forrest Gump, WALL-E) or they're completely plot-driven stories (James Bond, Indiana Jones).

A character arc is the transformation that the character undergoes during the course of the story. It's Ebenezer Scrooge's inner journey from humbug to gladheart. It's Joe Kingman's evolution from selfish bachelor to responsible father (The Game Plan).

I don't know about anyone else, but sometimes it feels like life or God or the universe has picked an issue to work on in me. The heat gets turned up more and more until I'm finally willing to submit to correction. So it is in fiction. We put our hero in the vise and start tightening the screw. All to get her to her moment of truth, where she can decide to change or throw off all correction. Either way, she'll be off the fence at last. And that breathless choice -- and the journey to it -- is what readers love to watch.

RI: Let's say I've already written the first draft of my novel and now I want to apply your methods to revise it. Am I too late, or is it possible to rewrite a novel using your story development techniques?

JG: Certainly it's ideal to encounter the teaching of "Plot Versus Character" when you're in the planning stages of writing a novel. When I teach this material at conferences, I always get one of two replies from several of the attendees. They say either "Thank you! You've just shown me why my story wasn't working" or "I hate you. Now I have to rewrite my whole novel."

[shrugs]

If you've finished your first draft and you're still strongly either a plot-first or a character-first novelist, that draft may be in trouble. Better to go back and do open-heart surgery than to say, "Ah, well, too late. I'll do this stuff next time." It may be that the reason you're not getting published is that you haven't learned to find the balance between plot and character. So why rush this manuscript to its doom? Isn't it worth working on to give it what it may be lacking?

Better to wait a few months while you revise it (even rewrite it) than to hurry on to a stack of rejections.

I'm not saying that having a good balance of plot and character will guarantee that your next novel will be published. There are lots of craft issues and other factors that go into publishing decisions. But I believe you should do everything you know to do to make a manuscript the best it can be before sending it off to face the lights.

RI: Thanks for your thoughts, Jeff!

JG: Thanks, Randy!

Here's a link (which contains my affiliate code) to the Amazon page for Jeff's book, PLOT VERSUS CHARACTER:

http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com/blinks/gerke/plotchar.php

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4) Marketing: Those Pesky Writing Conferences

It's January and therefore an excellent time to think about whether you'll be going to a writing conference this year.

Conferences are expensive and they take time out of your life, so they require a fair bit of advance planning.

Why go to a conference? Every writer is different, so your answers won't be the same as mine. Here are a few of the benefits I've gotten from writing conferences over the past twenty years:

* Met my first writing buddy

* Joined my first critique group

* Discovered that editors are real people

* Met my first agent

* Met hundreds of writers who became friends and allies

* Met a fellow novelist/scientist who became my best writing buddy and ultimately my co-author

* Submitted my work to real editors who gave me their unvarnished opinion

* Learned numerous fine points of the craft that helped me reach publishable quality

* Made a crucial contact who helped me sell my first book (nonfiction)

* Pitched a novel to an editor who ultimately bought it, my first published novel

* Brainstormed and pitched my second novel to the editor who ultimately bought it

* Met my second agent

* Began teaching and discovered that people like what I have to say about the art of fiction writing

* Critiqued and mentored many dozens of budding writers, some of whom have gone on to write award-winning or best-selling fiction

* Met my third agent

* Spent hundreds of hours just chatting with the coolest people on the planet -- novelists and the people who edit and agent them

I'm sure I've left out something, but you get the idea. Most of the above would have been much harder to do anywhere but at a writing conference.

If you've been going to conferences for a while, your list will look different from mine, but there'll be a fair bit of overlap. Of the hundreds of published novelists I know, most of them broke into the business by going to conferences.

That's why I talk so much about conferences -- because they work.

But I don't want to oversell conferences, because they are no substitute for talent and hard work. Conferences are a force-multiplier for your efforts. If you're not making any effort in your writing, a conference will be useless to you.

Conferences can be frustrating and depressing because they generally don't pay off instantly. If you go in with the belief that "this conference will fix all my problems and get me a big contract right away," then you're going to be horribly disappointed.

Conferences are more like compound interest. At first it seems like nothing is happening and you wonder if you're just wasting your money. After several years, you realize that a miracle has happened somewhere along the way, but you can't quite pinpoint when or where.

Be aware that it often takes quite a long time to break

in to the publishing world. My first novel hit the shelves about twelve years after I started writing.

That's a bit longer than average, but it's not abnormal. I'm pretty sure that the reason it took so long was because I hesitated to step up from regional conferences to national conferences. Once I made that leap, it didn't take long to get published.

A few years ago, I was thinking of writing an e-book on how to get the most out of a writing conference. But before I could write that book, somebody else beat me to it -- one of my friends, novelist and freelance editor Meredith Efken.

Her e-book is titled THE WRITERS CONFERENCE SURVIVAL GUIDE and it explains just about everything I can think of about going to conferences and getting your money's worth out of them.

Meredith hates marketing, so I made a deal with her to market her e-book on my web site for half the profits.

Once a year, I write a column about writing conferences and I pitch Meredith's book. This is that pitch.

If you're interested in learning more about Meredith's e-book, you can find all the details here:

http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com/info/mefken

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5) What's New At AdvancedFictionWriting.com

My book, WRITING FICTION FOR DUMMIES, has been selling well since it began shipping a year ago and is one of the most popular fiction writing books on Amazon. You can find out all about WRITING FICTION FOR DUMMIES here:
http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com/info/wffd

If you've already bought the book and like it, I'd be delighted if you wrote an Amazon review. Thanks to those of you who already have! I appreciate you!

I've also been gratified at the response to my latest software product, "Snowflake Pro," which makes it fast, easy, and fun to work through the steps of my well-known Snowflake method for designing a novel. You can find out more about Snowflake Pro at:
http://www.SnowflakeProSoftware.com

Currently, my co-author John Olson and I are preparing

our back list of novels for publication as e-books.

John and I are also creating some powerful online tools to make it easy for us to market our work effectively and easily. In due time, we'll make those tools available to other authors. More info on that when the opportune moment arrives.

I normally teach at roughly 4 to 6 writing conferences per year, depending on my schedule. For 2011, I have decided to cut back on my teaching so I can focus on a major project I'm working on. My schedule for 2011 is now all filled in.

I will be teaching at these conferences in 2011:

Mount Hermon Christian Writers Conference, (April)
8 hours mentoring a group of no more than 10 novelists
http://mounthermon.org/adult/professionals/writers-conference

Oregon Christian Writers Conference, (August)
6 hours teaching a lecture series named "Fiction 101"
http://www.oregonchristianwriters.com/summer-conference/

American Christian Fiction Writers, (September)
4 hours teaching a lecture series on the Snowflake method
http://www.acfw.com/conference/

If you'd like me to teach at your conference in 2012 or beyond, email me to find out how outrageously expensive I am.

If you'd just like to hear me teach, I have a number of recordings and e-books that are outrageously cheap. Details here:
http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com/info

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6) Randy Recommends . . .

I don't take paid ads for this e-zine. I do, however, recommend people I like.

I'm a huge fan of Margie Lawson's courses, both the ones she teaches in person and the ones she sells on her web site at
http://www.MargieLawson.com

Margie is a psychologist who applies what she knows about human psychology to writing fiction. I believe her material is brilliant. Check her out on her web site!

I've also become a fan of Thomas Umstattd's terrific uncommon-sense thoughts on internet marketing. You can read Thomas's blog at:
http://www.AuthorTechTips.com

Thomas is especially skilled at helping authors create an inexpensive but powerful web site using WordPress blogs. I am a huge fan of this approach, since it gives the most bang for the buck in an author site. Find out more about this at:
http://www.UmstattdMedia.com

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7) Steal This E-zine!

This E-zine is free, and I personally guarantee it's worth at least 413 times the price. I invite you to "steal" it, but only if you do it nicely . . .

Distasteful legal babble: This E-zine is copyright Randall Ingermanson, 2011.

Extremely tasteful postscript: I encourage you to email this E-zine to any writer friends of yours who might benefit from it. I only ask that you email the whole thing, not bits and pieces. Otherwise, you'll be getting desperate calls at midnight from your friends asking where they can get their own free subscription.

At the moment, there is one place to subscribe:
http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com

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8) Reprint Rights

Permission is granted to use any of the articles in this e-zine in your own e-zine or web site, as long as you include the following 2-paragraph blurb with it:

Award-winning novelist Randy Ingermanson, "the Snowflake Guy," publishes the Advanced Fiction Writing E-zine, with more than 23,000 readers, every month. If you want to learn the craft and marketing of fiction, AND make your writing more valuable to editors, AND have FUN doing it, visit
http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com.

Download your free Special Report on Tiger Marketing and get a free 5-Day Course in How To Publish a Novel.

Randy Ingermanson
Publisher, Advanced Fiction Writing E-zine
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