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Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius.

"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 (about 600 of you signed up in January), 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 bring my database up to date.

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.

* Day in, day out, professional writers take certain tactical actions as a matter of routine. Do you know what they are? Are you failing to do something that's essential to your long-term success? Read my organizing column, "Tactics of the Winning Novelist."

* Every story raises questions, hundreds of them. Do you have to answer them all? If not, why? If so, when? Check out this month's column on the craft of fiction writing, "Should You Answer That Question?"

* Marketing in today's light-speed world depends on grabbing attention fast and never letting go. But how does that work, exactly? Do you know the seven triggers that professional marketers use to fascinate the world? For my latest thoughts on this, see my marketing column, "How Fascinating Are You?"

Are you reading my blog? Join the fun here:
<http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com/blog>

2) Organizing: Tactics of the Winning Novelist

In my November column, I talked about the three essential skills you need if you want to succeed in the writing business -- Vision, Strategy, and Tactics.

In December, I discussed Vision and gave you some simple tips to help you define the Vision for your career and for each book.

In January, we tackled Strategy and I gave you a long term strategic plan for managing your writing business.

This month, let's talk Tactics.

Tactics are the little things, the specific actions you take to build your skills as a novelist and then to write your novel.

Let's be clear that those are separate tasks: building your skills and writing a novel. An analogy might help:

Being a novelist is a lot like being a marathon runner. Before you can actually RUN a marathon, you need to

first TRAIN for it. Typically, that takes a long time -- months of training to build the fitness and endurance to run an entire marathon.

But once you've reached that level, you can run more marathons with ease.

Of course, you'll continue to train between races, but now your training will be aimed at helping you run BETTER, rather than merely helping you FINISH.

In the same way, before you can write a novel, you need to develop your skills as a fiction writer.

But once you've got the skills to write one novel, you can write as many as you want with ease.

You'll always be improving your skills, but after you've written your first novel, you'll be working to write BETTER, not merely to FINISH.

I've identified five tactics you can use to build your skills as a novelist to the point where you're ready to write your first one.

These tactics are simple. In fact, they're "obvious." Success in life can be as simple as doing the obvious. You'd be amazed how many writers ignore all these tactics. You'd be amazed how fast you improve, once you start doing all five.

Here they are:

Tactic #1: Write on a consistent schedule.

Writing a novel is a marathon. A sprint here and a dash there won't get you to the finish line. Writing consistently for weeks and months WILL get you there.

Decide how many hours per week you can dedicate to writing. If you're a beginner, this might be only one or two. I recommend that beginners make it a goal to get up to five hours per week by the end of the first year of writing.

Your writing schedule is for WRITING. Not for research of your story world. Not for studying how to write. Not for reading magazines about writing. Not for reading blogs or hanging out on e-mail loops for writers. Not for going to writing conferences.

All of those are fine things, but they aren't WRITING.

You get better at running by running. You get better at writing by writing.

Tactic #2: Keep a log of your writing time and word count.

This sounds too simple (or possibly too anal) for words. It isn't.

Writing fiction is a JOB, at least for professional novelists. Someday, you'll be working with a publisher who has a publication schedule mapped out for two years in advance. You'll sign a contract with that publisher to deliver X amount of words on a particular date.

That date is not a fantasy. That date is reality. If you miss that date, it costs your publisher money. Yes, they build in some slack in the schedule. No, you don't ever want to use any of it. Not one minute. Your publishers will love you if they know they can trust you to meet your deadlines.

But you can't sign a contract to deliver X words on a particular date unless you know how fast you can write. You need to know how many words of output you can create in each hour of working time.

Good runners know what pace they can run each mile.

Professional writers know what pace they can write.

If you want to be a professional writer someday, then start acting like one today.

Tactic #3: Give yourself a weekly quota.

You can't do this until you've done #1 and #2 above. In order to create a meaningful quota, you have to know how many hours you can write each week, and you have to know how many words you can produce each hour. (They don't have to be GOOD words. Goodness comes later.)

Virtually all the successful writers I know assign themselves a quota of some sort for creating their first draft. While some writers use a daily quota and some use a monthly quota, most of them seem to set a weekly word count. I recommend weekly.

Your quota will be useless unless you actually meet it. Assign yourself a penalty for failing to reach your quota. Find an accountability partner who can check that you hit your quota and can make you pay the penalty if you fail.

Important: Make your quota possible. Never miss it.

Tactic #4: Find a critique group or critique buddy.

Most writers believe their work is either unutterably brilliant or wretchedly awful.

Generally, they're wrong on both counts. All writers are delusional. That's part of the job description.

There is only one way to know whether your work is any good or not.

You need somebody else to read your work and tell you.

You need a critique of your work regularly. I recommend that you get a critique monthly. Find one or more people with all of these qualities:

- * They understand fiction
- * They will be honest
- * They will be kind

If your critiquers lack any of these, then drop them like a burning porcupine because they're useless to you.

Tactic #5: Constantly study the craft of fiction.

It is not your critiquers' problem to tell you HOW to write better. Their job is to point out what you're doing well and what you're doing poorly.

Your job is to find ways to improve your strong points so they're world-class (your strong points will make editors say yes someday).

Your job is also to find ways to improve your weak points so they're at least adequate (your weak points will make editors say no right now).

Generally, critiquers don't actually know how to teach you how to improve your craft. They may think they do, but they usually don't. Skill in critiquing is not the same as skill in teaching.

You have plenty of sources for teaching you the craft:

- * Books
- * Magazines and e-zines
- * Classes
- * Conferences
- * Recorded lectures
- * Mentors

When you know specifically what you want to improve, find some source of teaching on that exact topic and study it. Then apply what you learned to your writing and get critiqued again to see if you got it. Don't quit studying until you get it.

That's it. Five tactics that will turn a talented beginner into a professional writer, if you do them consistently for the rest of your life.

To summarize, "Write, write, write! Get critiqued. Study. Repeat forever."

Simple? Yes.

Easy? No.

That's why there are many more talented beginners than professional writers.

3) Creating: Should You Answer That Question?

In writing fiction, you'll constantly be raising questions in your reader's mind. Those questions create curiosity and it's up to you to decide whether and when to satisfy that curiosity.

On the one hand, nothing kills mystique quicker than instantly answering every possible question that might arise. Curiosity keeps the pages turning.

On the other hand, nothing is more frustrating than trying to read a story where you lack essential context to understand what's going on, especially when you feel that the author is intentionally holding back critical information for no good reason.

What you're looking for is balance.

There are really two kinds of questions that you can raise: implicit and explicit questions.

An implicit question arises when the reader lacks context to understand something -- a foreign word or a family tradition or a character's backstory.

An explicit question is a question that one character asks another.

The meta-question you should always be asking yourself about implicit and explicit questions is this: "Should I answer that question?"

Sometimes you will; sometimes you won't. How do you know when you should and when you shouldn't?

There aren't any hard rules here, but I usually ask some related questions:

* Is the reader going to be hopelessly confused unless she gets an answer to the question? Generally, curiosity is good, but confusion that leads to reader frustration is bad.

* Is the story pace going to suffer if I take time to answer this question? During high-action parts of the story, you really don't want to take time out to explain things. Those explanations can usually wait at least a few pages until you reach a low-action part of the story.

Let's look at some examples from the great novel, *THE CHOSEN*, by Chaim Potok.

In *THE CHOSEN*, the two lead characters meet in chapter 1. They're fifteen year old Jewish boys, playing on rival baseball teams in 1944 Brooklyn.

Our hero, Reuven Malter, is playing second base, and his nemesis, Danny Saunders, hits a double. One of the first things Danny says to Reuven is this:

"I told my team we're going to kill you apikorsim this afternoon."

If you're not Jewish, you may be wondering what "apikorsim" are.

Potok doesn't tell you right away. It's clear from the context that the word is an insult. Potok doesn't break the pace of the story to explain any more.

But the word hangs there in the reader's mind. It gets repeated a few more times during the action part of the scene.

Five pages later, there's a lull in the action. Potok now explains that an apikoros originally meant an infidel. However, Hasidic Jews like Danny Saunders also use the term even for observant Jews who are somewhat more assimilated into American culture.

For Danny Saunders, Reuven Malter is an apikoros who will burn in hell.

Potok takes half a page to explain all this.

It's important to get it right, because Reuven and Danny are going to become friends, and Reuven's status as a non-Hasidic apikoros will be a major obstacle to their friendship.

Yet it's not so important that Potok felt it necessary to explain it in the heat of a baseball game. The exact definition of the word "apikoros" was an implicit question that could stew for a few pages before Potok took the time to explain it.

Now let's look at an explicit question a little farther on in the same book.

Late in the game, Reuven takes the pitcher's mound for

the final inning of the game. Danny Saunders comes to bat and hits a wicked curve incredibly hard right at Reuven. The ball shatters Reuven's glasses and smashes into his forehead.

Reuven is rushed to the hospital with a massive headache and a piercing pain in his left eye. There, he passes out. The next day, he regains consciousness and finds that he has a big bandage over his left eye. His father comes to visit.

Reuven has noticed that the nurse hasn't told him anything about his eye. So he asks his father straight out, "Is it all right?"

That's an explicit question that his father could answer immediately. But he doesn't.

Reuven has not yet grasped how serious the situation is. Neither has the reader. Reuven doesn't know he had a splinter of glass in his eye. He doesn't know that a big-shot eye surgeon performed an operation on his eye to remove the splinter. He has no idea what danger he's still in.

If Reuven's father answers the question right away, that would kill the tension before Reuven or the reader even know that there is any tension.

So Reuven's father equivocates. He's not a good liar and Reuven presses him with more questions and more.

Slowly, over a page and a half, the truth emerges. The splinter. The surgeon. The operation. The fact that the pupil of the eye was sliced and now has to heal. The fact that it might scar as it heals. The strong possibility that Reuven might never see again out of that eye.

By the end of the scene, Reuven is in a panic and he hates Danny Saunders more than he's ever hated anybody in his life.

Danny wanted to kill him. Danny may very well have blinded him in one eye. Danny is a despicable human being.

Hate takes time to build, and Potok builds it slowly by dragging out the answer to Reuven's question.

Sometimes an explicit question arises that shouldn't be answered until as late as possible. Let's look at an example from the same book.

While Reuven is convalescing in the hospital, Danny comes to apologize. Furious, Reuven sends him away. But Danny is persistent and he returns the next day to apologize again.

It takes some time, but slowly Reuven begins to understand Danny a little. Danny's father, Reb Saunders is a famous rebbe, leader of a Hasidic congregation. Danny is destined to be a rebbe someday, but that's the last thing he wants.

Danny is a once-in-a-generation genius and his restless mind chafes at the restrictions his father puts on him. Danny is trapped in a life he would never have chosen.

Danny has another problem, which he gradually reveals to Reuven.

Danny's father never talks to him. Except when they're studying Torah together, Reb Saunders never says a word to his son.

Reuven asks Danny why.

Because this question drives the entire story, revealing the answer would be the same thing as ending the book, so the answer MUST be delayed until the very end.

The reader desperately wants to know the answer, but the viewpoint character, Reuven, doesn't know the answer, and neither does Danny.

The reader knows she'll have to wait until Reb Saunders reveals it, in his own way, on his own schedule.

This works because Reb Saunders is not a viewpoint character. Since he's the only person who knows the answer, there's no problem in concealing it.

However, it wouldn't work if Reb Saunders were a viewpoint character. When a viewpoint character holds back a secret from the reader, it feels artificial and annoying, and the reader feels frustrated, cheated by the author.

Your novel will raise all sorts of questions in your reader's mind, some simple, some complex. Some implicit, some explicit.

It's up to you to figure out if and when to answer these questions.

Don't be too quick to answer them. But don't be too slow, either. Part of the art of writing fiction is deciding exactly how and when to reveal the answers.

4) Marketing: How Fascinating Are You?

If you want to stand out in a crowded market, then you should be thinking about how fascinating you are. You need fans who love your fiction. Who talk about your fiction. Who talk about you.

Fascination explains why Apple's new products create lines around the block every time Apple releases its latest gizmo.

Fascination made Marilyn Monroe a cult icon.

Fascination helped bring Adolf Hitler to power.

I've been reading a book lately, FASCINATE, by Sally Hogshead, a well known brand consultant and speaker.

There are seven ways to trigger fascination, according to Ms. Hogshead. She summarizes each of these by a single word:

- * Lust
- * Mystique
- * Alarm
- * Prestige
- * Power
- * Vice
- * Trust

Any surprises there? Not yet, I hope. Each of these sounds reasonable.

The surprises come when you unpack each of these words to figure out what makes them work. None of them are as simple as they seem.

Let's look at each of these in turn.

* Lust is anticipation of pleasure. No, it's not just about sex. It can be the anticipation of anything you like. Food. Beauty. Skiing. Dancing. Wine. Laughter. Any sort of pleasure, whether naughty or nice, is fair game for the Lust trigger.

Lust partly explains the intrigue of Marilyn Monroe, who was definitely a pleasure to look at. Marilyn's fans couldn't wait to see her in action.

Lust is part of the appeal of Apple Computer. Every device Apple makes is both a work of art and a pleasure to use. Apple fans can't wait for the next cool thing that they never knew they needed.

Lust, oddly enough, explains part of the success of the late comedian George Carlin. If you liked his kind of humor, then you simply couldn't wait to hear his next routine.

But Lust isn't the only trigger for fascination. As we'll see, each of the above fired multiple triggers.

* Mystique is about raising questions and NOT answering them. Those unanswered questions, if they're interesting enough, will get inside your mind and gnaw at you forever.

Mystique explains the popular fascination with UFOs. What aren't "they" telling us about the crash in Roswell? What are "they" hiding at Area 51? Why won't "they" come clean about the anti-gravity drive machine?

Mystique is one of the triggers Apple Computer relies on heavily. What kind of camera will the next iPhone have? What killer app will it unleash next? Will Apple fix that one pesky flaw that current iPhone owners love to hate? Numerous rumor web sites thrive on these kind of questions. How many rumor web sites deal with similar questions about HP, Microsoft, or Google?

Mystique is the reason that the Kennedy assassination still fascinates conspiracy theorists. When Lee Harvey Oswald was murdered two days after the assassination, he left behind a zillion questions. Those questions can never be answered, and that creates mystique.

* Alarm is the fear of something horrible happening. If it's bad enough, likely enough, and imminent enough, it's going to fascinate a lot of people.

Alarm about "the Russians" made them endlessly fascinating in Cold War novels by John LeCarre, Robert Ludlum, and Tom Clancy. When the Soviet Union broke wide open, that fear dissipated and Cold War novels lost most of their fizz.

Alarm about "radical Islam" now fills very much the same role, which is why you now see more novels featuring Islamic terrorists than Russian spies. Alarm only works if people believe it (whether or not that belief is justified).

Alarm about an impending apocalypse drives the current fascination with the alleged end of the Mayan calendar this year, for pretty much the same reasons that alarm over the second coming of Jesus has driven apocalyptic fever numerous times over the centuries.

* Prestige is the respect we give to those who have rank.

Prestige is part of the reason that every US President becomes instantly fascinating the moment he gets elected.

Prestige is one reason for the popularity of the British TV series DOWNTON ABBEY. (Excellent writing and acting are the other reasons.) The series centers on an aristocratic British family and its cast of servants, beginning in 1912 and continuing through World War I.

Prestige is part of the driver for the popularity of Apple's products. Rightly or wrongly, owning an iPhone gives you more prestige than owning an Android or Blackberry.

* Power is the ability to control.

Power is another part of the reason that US Presidents become fascinating when they take office. The President is commander in chief of the world's most powerful military. The President can press "the button."

Power makes the schoolyard bully fascinating. When a nerdy kid stands up to the bully, fights him, and wins, the bully loses his power. Suddenly, the nerd is the fascinating guy and the bully's a bore.

Power makes Google fascinating, because it plays a major role in deciding the winners and the losers in the great global marketing game known as search engine optimization.

* Vice is anything that you "aren't supposed to do."

Vice is coloring outside the lines. It's the Pandora's Box you aren't supposed to open. It's the forbidden fruit you aren't supposed to eat. When there's no reason given to you for a restriction, vice creates in you a fascination that grows and grows until you feel compelled to break the rule.

Vice made comedian George Carlin famous in 1972, when he developed a comedy routine named "Seven Words You Can Never Say on Television." By saying the words that must not be spoken, he made himself instantly fascinating. Forty years later, people still remember that routine.

Vice was part of the fascination of Marilyn Monroe. The breathy voice she used in singing Happy Birthday to John Kennedy came across as delightfully sinful.

* Trust is your loyalty to the familiar or the reliable.

Trust is the reason you choose the unhealthful fast food in the airport Food Court, rather than the healthful-looking option from the no-name joint. In unfamiliar territory, you want to know exactly what you're going to get and exactly how long it's going to take to get it.

Trust is a part of the reason Adolf Hitler could convince a nation to believe the unbelievable. He repeated the same simple message over and over with no variation. He eliminated the voice of the opposition. The same lie, repeated every day, became familiar and eventually built trust.

Trust is a major part of brand loyalty. FedEx built its brand on the slogan, "When it absolutely, positively has to be there overnight." If FedEx failed to deliver overnight, you'd feel betrayed. If the post office failed, you wouldn't, because the post office offers you much lower expectations.

In marketing your fiction, you want to build fascination in the minds of your fans. How do you do that?

You choose which of the seven fascination triggers you intend to pull, and then you focus on those.

Typically, you can focus on three or four triggers.

Your cover art, your web site, your blog, your Facebook page, your Twitter page -- every part of your public face -- should present the same message and pull the same fascination triggers.

Your marketing success will depend on how hard you pull those triggers and how consistently you pull them.

Want to know more about those fascination triggers? Want to know how to choose the ones that are right for you? Want to know how to pull them?

Check out Sally Hogshead's book FASCINATE. Part 3 is designed to help you figure out how to make your own marketing more fascinating.

You can visit Ms. Hogshead's web site here and take her "F-test" to learn your "F-score":
<http://www.SallyHogshead.com>

5) What's New At AdvancedFictionWriting.com

My book, WRITING FICTION FOR DUMMIES, has been selling well since it began shipping two years ago. For the last year, it's been the hottest selling fiction-writing book in the Kindle store. 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 flagship 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>

I normally teach at 4 to 6 writing conferences per year. I am currently booked up for 2012 (unless you want to make me a truly amazing offer or you have some incredible blackmail info on me).

If you simply MUST come hear me speak in 2012, you can do so at one of these locations:

February 16-19, Writing for the Soul Conference,
Denver:
<http://www.christianwritersguild.com/conference/>

March 30-April 3, Mount Hermon Christian Writers
Conference, central California:
<http://mounthermon.org/adult/professionals/writers-conference>

August 13-16, Oregon Christian Writers Conference,
northern Oregon:
<http://oregonchristianwriters.org/category/summerconference/>

August 24-26, Romance Writers of New Zealand, Auckland
<http://www.romancewriters.co.nz/conference/>

I expect to also attend the ACFW conference in Dallas in September and the Novelists, Inc. conference in New York in October, but have no plans to teach at either one of these.

Why don't I teach at more conferences? Because teaching is an incredibly demanding blood sport and it sucks a huge amount of energy out of my tiny brain. I prefer to put my absolute best into a few locations than to muddle through at many.

If you'd like me to teach at your conference in 2013 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>

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 Umstatted's terrific uncommon-sense thoughts on internet marketing. You can read Thomas's blog at:
<http://www.AuthorMedia.com/blog>

Thomas and his team are especially skilled at helping authors create a 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.AuthorMedia.com>

7) Steal This E-zine!

This E-zine is free, and I personally guarantee it's worth at least 101 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, 2012.

Extremely tasteful postscript: I encourage you to e-mail this E-zine to any writer friends of yours who might benefit from it. I only ask that you e-mail 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.

Of course you should not forward this e-mail to people who don't write fiction. They won't care about it.

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

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Award-winning novelist Randy Ingermanson, "the Snowflake Guy," publishes the Advanced Fiction Writing E-zine, with more than 29,000 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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