

The Advanced Fiction Writing E-zine

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Circulation: 32199 writers, each of them creating a 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 (more than 200 of you signed up in November), 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 let you update your address on my system.

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.

* Do you know how creative you are? Do you know that there are ways to increase your creativity? Check out my organizing column for this month, "Your Creative Superpowers."

* Every novelist knows the hazards of having too much backstory. But what about the hazards of having too little? How do you know when yours is not enough? Read my craft column, "Too Little Backstory."

* Marketing can be hard, frustrating work. Many authors have told me that they don't know if their marketing works, but at least it's better than doing nothing. But is that true? One of the most important questions you can ask is the one I raise this month in my marketing column, "Is Your Marketing Better Than Nothing?"

2) Organizing: Your Creative Superpowers

If you're a human being, then you're creative.

If you're a novelist, then you're very creative.

There are actually a number of different ways to be creative. Most novelists excel at some of them. Most novelists are weak in others.

I like to think of the various modes of creativity as "creative superpowers".

I suspect that your total creative ability isn't just the sum of your creative superpowers.

I suspect that your total creative ability is more like the multiplication of your creative superpowers.

The reason is because when you want to create something new, you typically need to work through a whole chain of creative tasks, each using a different creative superpower. The more creative each link in the chain, the more creative the final result.

The bad news is that creativity is hard to outsource.

The good news is that you can learn to be more creative.

To do that, you need to understand what the various creative superpowers are and then exercise your creative muscles to develop those superpowers.

I've been reading a book lately on creativity, YOUR CREATIVE BRAIN, by Shelley Carson, Ph.D.

Dr. Carson identifies seven different creative superpowers (she calls them "brainsets" in analogy to the word "mindset", but my inner geek responds better to the phrase "creative superpower" so that's what I'll use here.)

YOUR CREATIVE BRAIN helps you figure out which creative superpowers you're naturally good at. More important, it has exercises to help you develop your strength in each of them.

What are those creative superpowers? Here's a rough description of each one:

* The "Absorb" superpower is the one you use when you see the world around you in a creative way. You are absorbing apparently useless information and finding an unexpected use for it.

Alexander Fleming was doing experiments on bacteria and found that they weren't growing well in a lab dish that had been contaminated with a certain kind of mold. He realized that this could be useful and invented penicillin.

George de Mestral was brushing burrs out of his dog's fur and realized that the annoying little things would make an amazing fastener. That led him to invent Velcro.

* The "Envision" superpower is the one you use to imagine "being there," complete with the sights, sounds, smells, and feelings of whatever "there" is. It's also the superpower a mechanic uses to mentally rearrange the parts on a car. When you read a novel and "see" the story, you're using your Envision superpower.

I remember helping friends move into their house. When I carried some boxes upstairs, I found that two guys had spent about twenty minutes trying to manhandle a desk through a narrow doorway, but it just wouldn't go. They were arguing about whether to take the desk apart to get it through.

I immediately saw in my head a sequence of steps that I thought might work. It took me five minutes to convince them to let me try it. Two minutes later, the desk was in place.

* The "Connect" superpower lets you solve problems that are ill-posed and don't have a unique answer. To use this superpower, your brain makes connections between things that don't have any obvious relationship.

I used to interview potential software engineers for my company and my final question was always, "Name as many ways as you can to kill your manager with a doorknob."

I was looking for engineers who could improvise. What I usually got was a disbelieving stare. Very few job candidates could come up with a single innovative murder method. (Most novelists can easily think of a dozen.)

I never identified any specially creative engineers using this question. But I did find quite a number of applicants who were incredibly eager to work on my team. Strangely, my CEO always seemed a bit nervous around me.

* The "Reason" superpower is the ability to use logic to solve problems.

Those pesky software engineers excel at using Reason. Novelists, not so much. When you read a story with an inconsistent plot, the author fell down on using his Reason superpower.

* The "Evaluate" superpower is the one you use when you're editing your story. You make judgments on what's good and what's bad. Your job is to keep the good and replace the bad.

This superpower is easier to use on other people than on yourself. It's obvious what the other guy is doing right -- and doing wrong. But many novelists are too easy on themselves -- or too hard.

* The "Transform" superpower is the one you use when

you turn your horrible life experiences into a great story. There's an old saying that nothing bad ever happens to a novelist because, in the end, it's all research.

This superpower seems to be strongest in artists of all types -- writers, painters, musicians. It lets us turn our ashes into diamonds.

* The "Stream" superpower is the one you use when you're writing a first draft and you move into that zone where the words fly onto the page and time passes without you noticing.

Some writers never enter that zone. Others do it every time. Guess who enjoys the writing more?

Now here's the important point. You're strong in some of these creative superpowers and weak in others. That's the way you are.

But it's not the way you always have to be.

There are exercises you can do to increase your creative superpowers.

The book YOUR CREATIVE BRAIN has a number of exercises to help you boost each of your superpowers. And if you're creative, you can easily think up new exercises, once you understand the principles.

My goal in the coming year is to build up all seven of my creative superpowers.

Want to join me? Check out Dr. Carson's web site here:
<http://www.shelleycarson.com/>

You may never look at a doorknob the same way again.

3) Creating: Too Little Backstory

Beginning novelists often commit the capital crime of starting out with too much backstory. They're afraid that the reader won't understand the main story, so they feel compelled to put in long explanations.

Boring explanations about characters the reader has barely met yet.

Advanced novelists know better than to give the reader too much backstory.

But advanced novelists often commit the opposite offense -- putting in too little backstory.

Is that possible? And why is that wrong?

Let me illustrate with a little story:

You're going out to dinner with your best friend. As you sit down at your table, she says, "I've got a secret!"

You stare at her. "So, um . . . what's your secret?"

She shrugs. "I'll tell you later. It's not that important."

"Then why'd you bring it up?" you ask.

"Well, it's fairly important. You'll understand when I tell you."

"Why can't you tell me now?"

"I just want to build your curiosity so you won't leave halfway through dinner."

"Why would I leave halfway through dinner?"

"Because I'm not all that interesting and you might decide to go sit with someone else."

"Are you that insecure?"

"It's a really important secret."

"Then tell me now."

"I can't tell anyone."

"You've already promised you'll tell me later! Why can't you tell me now? What kind of game are you playing?"

A long pause. "So what shall we order?"

If your friend treated you like that, you'd be pretty irritated. Stringing you along with the promise of a secret is weird. It's unnatural. If a secret's important enough to mention, it's important enough to tell. If it really can't be told, then it shouldn't be mentioned in the first place.

But authors do something similar when they give the reader hints about backstory, but then unnaturally shut down. This can happen in any category, but let's look at a simple example in the romance category.

In a romance novel, the hero and heroine generally meet in the first chapter. They're immediately attracted to each other, but for various reasons, they can't get together right away. The story is about how they each overcome the obstacles keeping them apart.

Often, one of the obstacles is some previous relationship. That's fine. What's not fine is making an abstract allusion to that obstacle, as in this made-up example:

"Don't you think Jim-Bob's hot?" Mary Sue asked. "Your tongue's hanging out of your mouth, so admit it."

"Yeah, sort of." Honey Jane sighed. Sure, Jim-Bob was hot, but . . . memories of John-Boy flashed through her mind. "Jim-Bob's just not my type."

In the above, we've just got our first hint of Honey Jane's backstory with someone named John-Boy. But it's abstract. The author is TELLING you that there's a memory. He's not SHOWING you the memory.

That's the moral equivalent of, "I've got a secret but I'm not telling yet."

There you are inside the head of the point-of-view character. You're supposed to know everything she knows. But she knows a secret, and she won't even think about it, because then you'd find out. That's just weird.

When I see things like this in novels, I know perfectly well that the author is going to share that backstory sometime later on. But I still feel irritated. The author is insecure and is trying too hard to make me curious so I won't put down the book.

What's the fix here? As an author, you can't stop the main story to feed the reader a big chunk of backstory. There are two main ways to handle this:

- * If you're in the point of view of a character who knows the backstory, then give a little piece of it. Maybe mention John-Boy's gambling habit. Or his sky-high ego. Or the fact that he was playing three girlfriends at the same time. Something specific, but not the whole story.

- * If you're in the point of view of a character who doesn't know the backstory, then have her figure out there's a secret and try to weasel it out of the character who knows. This doesn't make the reader feel cheated, because the point-of-view character isn't hiding anything from her.

In the suspense category, you'll often find a flawed hero who has a mission. But the mission is harder than it should be because it stirs up some old hate or hurt inside the hero. Here's a made-up example of showing too little backstory:

Control leaned forward in his chair and smiled at George. "Look, I know you hate Howard's guts, but you two are my best men and you've got to cooperate or we won't get that bridge blown up. Can you do that?"

Rage clawed at George's heart. He'd never forgive Howard. Ever. He'd slit Howard's throat before he'd go on a mission with him. George gave Control a sheepish grin. "I'm a professional. Of course I can do that."

In the above, we've just learned that George hates somebody named Howard. We know nothing about Howard. George does, but he's giving us nothing to hate. Once again, we've got abstractions when we need some concrete details.

Did Howard once leave George behind to be tortured by Nazis? Did he steal his lady? Put laxatives in his brownies? We don't need the whole story, but we need something to work on.

It's just not natural for George to feel rage without some sort of concrete image in his mind -- something he saw, something he heard, something he felt or tasted. The reader feels cheated when the author glosses over the POV character's thoughts with an abstraction.

The bottom line is simple. Show the reader the amount of backstory that the point-of-view character would naturally think.

Not too much, of course. That would bore your reader.

But not too little either. That's just bad manners.

4) Marketing: Is Your Marketing Better Than Nothing?

I've seen authors try all kinds of marketing schemes over the years. I've tried all sorts myself.

There's one question authors rarely ask that they should ALWAYS ask:

Is this marketing idea better than doing nothing?

You might think that's a silly question. Here's why it's actually a very good question.

Suppose you did no marketing at all for your book. It would sell a certain number of copies all on its own. Call that number X. Maybe it's 100 copies. Maybe it's 10,000.

If you did no marketing, you wouldn't be sitting around doing nothing at all. You'd be working on your next book. That's what writers do.

You could work your whole career that way -- never doing any marketing, always just writing. If you did that, you'd get a certain return on your investment.

If you're working with a traditional publisher, it's not that hard to calculate your return on investment for working in this mode. Say you get an advance of \$5000 and you spend 500 hours working on the book. That works out to \$10 per hour.

The alternative is to go try that marketing scheme you wanted to try. Is it worth your time?

That depends. It's reasonable to think that your marketing efforts will result in a certain number of

extra copies being sold. Call that number Y .

In principle, the reward for your marketing efforts ought to be Y multiplied by your royalties per book.

If you earn royalties of a dollar per book, then selling an extra 1000 copies in principle earns you \$1000. You can divide that by the number of hours you spend marketing to figure out your return on investment for marketing.

But it's not that simple. The reason is that you don't earn any royalties until your book has earned out its advance.

Remember that we defined X as the number of copies your book would sell if you did no marketing. If selling X copies doesn't earn out your advance, then you're going to be putting in marketing hours that give you no reward at all -- until you've sold enough extra copies to earn out your advance.

That may sound crazy, but it's the way the publishing business works.

It's quite possible (in fact it's common) for authors to put in quite a lot of time marketing a book and still fail to have that book earn out its advance.

In that case, they don't have to pay the publisher for the unearned part of the advance. (That's good for the author.)

But they also don't earn one penny for all those marketing hours they put in to sell extra copies of their book. Only the publisher benefits from the author's marketing time. (That's bad for the author.)

In that case, there's a disincentive for authors to market their work. You can ask any published author -- this is very common. Most books don't earn out their advance, even with the author's marketing help.

Of course, publishers put a lot of pressure on authors to do all that free marketing. Authors who don't market

their work may find that they can't get another contract from their publisher. But authors who do market their work have no guarantee that they'll get another contract either.

If this sounds horribly unfair and weird, that's because it is. Life is unfair and weird. Knowing that is half the battle.

The incentives for marketing are stronger for authors who self-publish their work. When you self-publish, every extra copy you sell puts more money in your pocket.

Of course, self-published authors rarely get any kind of placement of their books in bookstores, so they can't expect to move very many copies unless they do some marketing. (We all know about those pesky exceptions who sell a zillion copies by word of mouth, but they're rare.)

That's the major advantage of working with a traditional publisher. If you do no marketing at all, you'll probably sell many more copies than if you self-published and did no marketing.

But self-published authors still need to ask whether marketing their book will earn them more money than just writing another book.

The reason is because not all marketing is effective. A really bad marketing plan can waste lots of time, cost lots of money, and generate no extra revenue.

Furthermore, the more books you have available for sale, the more they'll help market each other. When a reader finds an author they love, they tend to buy more books by that author.

Some authors believe that the best marketing for a novel is to write another novel.

Life would be easy if you could magically know in

advance what those numbers X and Y are. Remember, X is the number of books you'd sell if you did no marketing. Y is the extra copies you'd sell if you did some marketing.

But life is not easy. Life is a struggle. The only way to know those numbers is to measure them.

That is one thing authors rarely do -- measure the effects of their marketing.

The reason few authors measure their marketing is that it's hard. Many authors will tell you it's impossible.

Yes, it's impossible to get exact numbers. But it's possible to get reasonable estimates of how well your marketing is working.

How to estimate your marketing effectiveness is a topic for another day. I've written on that topic in the past and will write more in the future. If you Google the phrase "how to measure your marketing effectiveness," you'll get nearly three million results, which ought to keep you going for a few hours.

The point is to always be asking the right questions, even if you don't always know the exact answers.

Asking the right questions will prime your mind to be on the lookout for the answers.

If you're not asking the right questions, then you're not even in the game.

Here's that question again, and you should ask it every time your editor or your agent or your writer friend or your aunt tells you that you "ought to be" doing this or that marketing activity to promote your book:

Is that marketing scheme better than doing nothing?

Ask it early. Ask it often.

Do nothing without a purpose.

5) What's New At AdvancedFictionWriting.com

I'm currently working on a new edition of my novel DOUBLE VISION, to be released in e-book format. I'm also revamping my personal web site.

My book, WRITING FICTION FOR DUMMIES, has been selling well since it began shipping three years ago. For well over a 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 went to the Amazon page and clicked the Like button at the top:
<http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com/blinks/wffd.php>

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 wildly popular Snowflake method for designing a novel. You can find out more about Snowflake Pro at:
<http://www.SnowflakeProSoftware.com>

I normally teach at four to six writing conferences per year. In 2012, I've now taught at four conferences and that's all the teaching I'll do this year.

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. Please be aware that I'm cutting back on my teaching in 2013 to give me a chance to tackle some long-standing projects.

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 Umstattd'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>

I'm watching Thomas's latest venture with interest: The BestSeller Society. I don't know enough to have an opinion on it yet, but wanted to mention it because Thomas is a bright guy who usually has smart things to say. More info on it here:

<http://www.bestsellersociety.com>

Please be aware that in this section I ONLY recommend folks who have never asked me to do so. Tragically, this means that if you ask me to list you here, I will be forced to say no.

7) Steal This E-zine!

This E-zine is free, and I personally guarantee it's worth at least 314 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 fiction 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:

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

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