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The Advanced Fiction Writing E-zine

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

Those of you who have joined in the past month (nearly 200 of you are new since my last issue), 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, quitcher complaining and take action -- there's a link at the bottom of this email that will put you out of your misery.

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

Wanna go on a cruise with me? Seriously? Because if you're serious, I am too. I'm helping put together something we're calling "Alaska Cruise: Fiction Writing Seminar at Sea." Check it out in this issue!

If there's anything most writers hate, it's writing

proposals. Not to be too contrarian about it (OK, I do like being a contrary cuss) but I LOVE writing proposals. So I'll be discussing the ins and outs of writing proposals over the next few months. Because professional writers need to know how to do this.

In recent months, I've talked at length about various techniques I've been trying in order to manage my time better. This month, I wrap up and summarize what I've learned.

Need to write a fight scene? In this issue, I'll talk about the things you need to know in order to do that--even if you've never been in a fight yourself.

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## 2) Would You Like to Go On a Cruise?

My buddy John Olson called me last month and asked if my wife and I would be interested in going on a cruise with him and his wife next summer. An Alaska cruise on one of those Princess cruise ships. Now there's a no-brainer question, if I ever heard one!

John and I wrote a couple of novels together back when we were just starting out as novelists, but lately I haven't seen as much of him and Amy as I'd like to. So this'll be a great chance to hang out again and get caught up. I talked to my wife and she's gung-ho to go too.

Now here's the kicker: You're invited to join us!

The thing is that John's wife Amy has gotten herself certified as a "travel geek." (I don't know the correct term, but you have to jump through a ton of hoops to get certified.) Amy's always loved travel, so now she's spending her time creating cool excursions for cool people.

So this cruise is Amy's idea. She's putting together an "Alaska Cruise: Fiction Writing Seminar at Sea". And it's tax deductible, because this is going to be an intensive fiction writing workshop. John and I will give some lectures on the craft of writing. The exact content of the lectures will be tuned to best fit the writers who come on the cruise with us. We'll also do a group critique of manuscripts. And we'll do some one-on-one mentoring with each of the writers in the group.

The rest of the time, we'll do the cruise-ship thing, which I understand includes about 23 hours per day of eating.

If ya ask me, this sounds like heaven, minus the halos and harps. Cruising Alaska, eating enormous quantities of great food, and hanging out with the coolest people in the known universe -- other writers.

And yes, you can bring non-writing family and friends along, if you like. Just bear in mind that the cruise will be tax-deductible only for writers. It's a business expense, just like any other writing conference, even if you're not yet making a profit on your writing.

The cruise will last 7 days, July 14-20, 2007. The boat leaves from Seattle and returns to the same spot. And it's cheaper than I imagined it would be. John and I have already made our deposits. Wanna join us? I've posted a few details, including contact info for Amy Olson, the Cruise Coordinator, on my web site at: [http://www.advancedfictionwriting.com/home/cruise\\_info.php](http://www.advancedfictionwriting.com/home/cruise_info.php)

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### 3) On Writing Proposals -- Part 1

This is the first in a series of columns on writing a book proposal. In this issue, we'll tackle the thorny question of getting endorsements for your proposal.

At least once a week, I get an email from a writer wanting to know if I can write an endorsement for the proposal she is writing for her novel.

The answer to that is very clearcut: no and yes.

If that sounds confusing, good. Because the request is ambiguous in the first place, so it's only fair that the answer should be ambiguous too.

A little background: It seems that more and more publishers are encouraging unpublished novelists to include a list of possible endorsements in their proposals. From the publisher's point of view, this makes sense. If a novelist knows that Steven King guy well enough to get an endorsement, then that's a big marketing plus.

The problem, I think, is that many writers are confused about what exactly is being asked for here. And that translates into massive confusion when said writers ask published authors for that pesky endorsement.

The thing is that you have a number of ways you can play this. Some of them are reasonable and some are unreasonable. Here are your options:

a) Ask a published novelist whom you've never met to

read your manuscript and write an endorsement that you can put in your proposal.

b) Ask a published novelist whom you know well to read the manuscript and write an endorsement to put in your proposal.

c) Ask a published novelist whom you know well and who has already read your work to write an endorsement to put in your proposal.

d) Ask an expert whom you interviewed for your novel to read your manuscript and write an endorsement for your proposal.

e) Ask one of the above persons to agree to read the manuscript "someday," if it ever gets accepted for publication, and then possibly write an endorsement.

Now you can see why the answer to an endorsement request is so ambiguous. There's a lot of difference in those options (a) through (e). Let's look at them in turn.

a) If you ask a published novelist you don't know to read a manuscript that hasn't yet been accepted for publication, you are asking a LOT. It might take all day to read your book. Your book might not be any good. Or it might be in desperate need of a good harsh edit. So you are essentially asking this published novelist to do the same job that agents and editors normally do -- except that agents and editors are PAID to do this kind of work. But it's not ethical to pay a dime to your endorser. The only possible answer to this kind of request is "no". Because saying "yes" even once guarantees that a flood of similar requests will deluge the author, who will starve to death because he'll never write another word.

b) If you ask a published novelist whom you know well to read a manuscript that hasn't yet been accepted for publication, you are still asking a LOT. This has all the hazards of (a) above, with the extra one that now you're putting a strain on your friendship by asking something that really isn't reasonable. Some novelists will say yes to this, but they really shouldn't. Because if your novel is lousy, you've put them in a terrible bind.

c) If you ask a published novelist whom you know well and who has already read your manuscript, even though it hasn't yet been accepted for publication, you are one lucky goose. How the heck did you meet this saint? Presumably, this novelist is in your critique group. Or she's a relative or long-time friend. In any event, you want to tread lightly here. If you ask outright for an endorsement, there's the terrible risk that your novel

is lousy and you're going to put your friend on the spot. It helps here if she's already told you she loves the book. In fact, you should only really ask if she DOES love the book. Now, if she's the saint I think she is, she'll probably offer to write an endorsement for you before you even ask. That's the best of all worlds, because then you're not putting her on the spot, she's volunteering. I have written such an endorsement only twice that I can recall. I don't mind volunteering, when the book is good. I DO mind being involuntarily volunteered. I don't like being put on the spot.

d) If you have an expert whom you interviewed for your novel, then you're in good shape. This expert might be a street cop or a scientist or a World War II veteran or a llama breeder or anyone who's provided you with special info for your novel. These folks have two things going for them. First, they generally don't have a thousand other novelists asking them for endorsements, so saying "yes" to you doesn't put them at risk of being deluged with requests. Second, such an expert usually isn't expected to know good writing from bad, so if your novel is lousy, they won't know and nobody will blame their faulty judgment. So there's no pressure on them on that account. So ask your expert! The worst they can do is say "no."

e) In all of the above cases, you've asked somebody to read the manuscript and write an endorsement before it gets accepted for publication. The endorsement then serves partly to validate you to the editor and the publishing house. But you have another option. You can ask them if they'll consider reading the proposal ON CONDITION that you sell it to a publisher. So they won't actually have to read it until AFTER some editor somewhere buys it. You can see that this really takes your potential endorser off the spot. She's no longer serving as "quality control" for the publishing houses. So it's safe to say "yes" here, because it'll only ever need to be read if it's actually good enough to get published. And every endorser knows that she always has the option to read 20 pages and then quit. Or read the whole thing and not write an endorsement. So there's no pressure here. You'll note that this also makes such a promise pretty empty. If you like, you can line up a bunch of novelists in your proposal who promise to read the novel "for possible endorsement." But they could all back out, so there's not a lot of value in lining up these possible endorsers at the proposal stage. With one exception: if they are experts in the field you're writing. Expert sources aren't going to back out of writing an endorsement if they don't like your style. They'll probably love your style, as long as you get your facts right. So line up some experts in the endorsement section of your proposal, if experts are relevant for the book you're writing.

My own personal policy, when someone asks for an endorsement in the proposal is as follows: First, I point out that I can't possibly read and endorse unsold manuscripts. Second, I say that I'm always happy to read books for "possible endorsement" once they've been sold, so please sell the book first and then come back and ask me and I'll say "yes" -- provided it's in a genre which I like. My friends know which genres I like to read. Third, I ask that I not be listed in the proposal as a "potential endorser," for the very good reason that I don't want editors to believe that I'm giving any sort of "seal of approval" on projects I haven't even looked at yet.

Once in a while, a manuscript catches my eye at a writing conference, and then I'll tell the author to use my name when talking to editors or when writing a proposal. Or I may even make an introduction to an appropriate editor or agent. But I prefer to volunteer for this, because then I have some measure of quality control.

I have read and endorsed books by people I've never met. On the other hand, I've sometimes read books by close friends and then NOT endorsed the book. This can mean that I was too busy to finish the book or it can mean that I didn't care for the book. Or it might mean I'm in a crabby, grouchy, grinchy mood today. Don't ask so I won't have to tell.

I would hazard that most published writers have a policy similar to mine. I was a bit more of a pushover early on in my career, until my agent pointed out that it's not my job to save the ENTIRE world. It's quite OK to leave part of that job to the next guy.

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#### 4) Time Management for Writers -- Summary

I've been talking about time management in this e-zine for the last several issues because it's important to me and because I strongly suspect it's important to many writers too. After all, we're the people who are saving the world. And saving worlds is a big, big job.

I've laid out a number of ideas in recent articles. Now I'd like to summarize and synthesize. You'll see that I've improved on last month's Divide And Conquer method by adding in an idea from an earlier column.

So here are the things I've been finding useful in managing my time better:

a) Keep a log of how you spend your time each day. You can't optimize something unless you can measure it.

b) Spend less of your time and money on things you VALUE, and spend more of your time and money on learning SKILLS or buying TOOLS that will make you more productive.

c) Outsource or delegate stuff, but only when it makes sense.

d) Make a list of the Big Things you'd like to achieve in the next year. Put a star next to the ONE thing on the list that you simply must get done, even if you achieve none of the rest.

e) Make a list of several things you'd like to achieve in the next quarter. These can be pieces broken off from the tasks on your annual list, or they can be smaller tasks that can be done in one quarter. Put a star next to the ONE task on the list that you MUST achieve this quarter.

f) Make a list of the things you'd like to achieve this month. Again, these can be stepping stones to your quarterly list, or standalone tasks. Put a star next to the ONE thing you really insist on getting done this month.

g) Make a list of things you want to get done this week. You are clever and will know how to break down your monthly list as needed. Put a star next to the ONE thing that had better get done this week at all costs.

h) Make a list of things you want to do today. Put a star next to the ONE thing that you will bust your gut to get finished by the end of the day, (even if you get nothing else done).

i) Every day (and week and month and quarter and year), MAKE SURE you get the starred task done, even if it's the ONLY thing that you do. It's nice to do some or all of the other tasks on the list, but there is only one that's required and you know which one it is because it has a star beside it. Whatever else happens, DO THAT ONE.

k) Whenever you cross a starred item off one of your lists, decide whether you want to put a star on a second item, or whether you're done with the heavy lifting for that time period. It's OK to take a breather after you accomplish something important.

l) If something happens to change your priorities, change your lists to reflect them. This may even mean (heaven forbid!) moving that star to another task. You're the boss, so you get to decide.

m) At the end of the day, ask yourself two questions: Did you spend your time well? Did you achieve your starred item for the day?

If you read last month's column, you'll know that I've souped up the Divide And Conquer method by adding a partial prioritization to each list (putting a star on ONE item). Note that assigning priorities to EVERY item on a list would be a lot of wasted work and anyway it's not very accurate. But you generally know what the #1 item is on the list. That's the one that should get the star.

Here's why this scheme is efficient: It's a whole lot less work to set one priority than to set 10 or 20. When things change in your life, it's a lot easier to reset one priority than 10 or 20. Be lazy! That's how things get done.

Just so you'll know, I'm eating my own cat food (so to speak). My list for today has 17 items on it. Of these, the one with the star is "Write e-zine." The fact that you are reading this is proof positive that I succeeded. I've also crossed off 7 of the others. Yes, I did some of the "lower priority" tasks first -- but only because I knew they wouldn't interfere with getting the e-zine out. I also delegated some tasks to my wife.

If you ever cross off every item on your daily list, call Oprah. You will have achieved Ultimate Success and will probably get a book deal out of it. I have never, ever crossed off every item on my list for the day.

However, the odds are very good that I'll get everything on my Annual List done by December 31. And is that cool or what? Because it's the Big Things that matter. Life is about selectively ignoring the Little Things so you can achieve the Big Things you really wanted to do all along.

This scheme is actually working for me. Some days it works better than others, but it works. If it works for you, don't tell me. Just send me large numbers of unmarked \$100 bills, because my Life Goal (achieving Total World Domination) is going to be expensive. And tell your friends that I'm responsible for making you smarter, happier, sexier, and taller.

If it doesn't work for you, then please blame Congress. They deserve a little recognition now and again.

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5) How To Write a Fight Scene -- Part 1

I rarely interfere with the writing styles of my friends if they're published authors. I don't want to

mess them up. The one exception is when their fight scenes stink. That's when I step in and do a little coaching.

There is nothing in the world easier than to write a well-paced and exciting fight scene. There is nothing in the world easier than to screw up a fight scene.

You may argue that those two things can't both be the easiest thing in the world. Sigh. Don't bother me with logic here. Just step outside and we'll settle this argument like Real Men.

It may be that you'll never need to write a fight scene. If so, keep driving by -- there's nothing to look at here.

But if you think you might ever need to have your characters duke it out, then pay attention. Fight scenes are really easy, if you know the rules.

Here are the Official Fight Scene Rules:

- a) Show, don't tell
- b) Make it happen in real-time
- c) Enforce causality
- d) Show sequence, not simultaneity
- e) Favor completed verbs over continuing action verbs
- f) Show the fastest stuff first
- g) For every action, show a reaction
- h) Use interior monologue and dialogue to set the pace

I could explain all these in boring detail, but that would be Telling you. Right now, I want to Show you. So here's a Wretched Fight Scene that violates all the rules. Read it first, weep some, and then pull yourself together so we can analyze it.

After taking six or eight or maybe even ten punches and kicks to all parts of his body -- such as the solar plexus and shins and head -- Arnie was hurting quite badly, although perhaps not as badly as when Mrs. Weevil gave him a D in spelling in third grade when he KNEW "potato" had no "e" in it.

In any event, Arnie ducked his head and spun to the right, simultaneously kicking out furiously with his foot and shouting that Bruce was an ambidextrous excuse for a moron, just after he saw Bruce throwing another punch at him. But none of this worked, because before he could do any of that, Bruce jumped high in the air and kicked Arnie in the eye, so none of the stuff Arnie tried actually worked because he was lying there on the ground wondering if he was ever going to see Cindy Lou Who again, who had grown up to be quite cute, even if she was a dumb mutt in seventh grade, and also he was screaming in agony.

"Want some more, you little lout?" Bruce said as he

kicked Arnie in the kidneys about fifteen times and then grabbed his head and pounded it on the ground. All this time, Arnie was jabbing Bruce in places like the groin and stomach, but it didn't do any good until the end when Bruce fell over in a faint, just after Arnie cried "Uncle!"

Oh, Lordy, Lordy! Where to start on this horrible thing?

a) Let's begin with the first rule, "Show, don't tell." This is violated almost continuously. Look at the first sentence:

"After taking six or eight or maybe even ten punches and kicks to all parts of his body -- such as the solar plexus and shins and head..."

The reason this is "telling" is because those punches are all lumped together into one big glop, making it impossible to say with any certainty how many punches there actually were. Nor are we sure exactly which body parts are getting all the punishment, although we get a list of a few parts that might be getting whacked. Or might not -- who knows?

And furthermore, what's Arnie doing while he's taking all those punches? Don't tell me he's just patiently accepting them? Does he throw a counterpunch? Beg for mercy? Phone E.T.? We can't see this scene. We can't see Arnie. We're just being told about it.

The rest of the scene has numerous similar examples of telling, but let's look at some of the other rules violations.

b) The next rule is "Make it happen in real-time." When a fight is happening in real-time, you see one punch and then RIGHT AWAY, you see the response and then RIGHT AWAY you see the next punch. In real-time, when the action is falling fast and furious, you don't have time for musing like this:

"Arnie was hurting quite badly, although perhaps not as badly as when Mrs. Weevil gave him a D in spelling in third grade when he KNEW 'potato' had no 'e' in it."

If you don't believe me, I'll send Bruce over to discuss the matter with you, and we'll just see how much time you have for thinking about dear Mrs. Weevil.

c) Let's move on to the next rule, "Enforce causality." When I talk about causality, I mean that a cause should be shown first, and then the effect AFTERWARDS. If you show the effect and then the cause, it looks absurd. As in this paragraph:

"In any event, Arnie ducked his head and spun to the

right, simultaneously kicking out furiously with his foot and shouting that Bruce was an ambidextrous excuse for a moron, just after he saw Bruce throwing another punch at him."

So let's untangle this. What happened first? Arnie saw Bruce throwing another punch at him. But that's shown LAST in this sentence. The effect is shown FIRST, and it's a long sequence of events that I've drawn out ludicrously: Arnie ducks his head. Arnie spins to the right. Arnie kicks. Arnie shouts. Only after we see all that do we see the cause for it all.

d) The next rule tells us to "Show sequence, not simultaneity". What I mean is that it rarely makes sense to try to make two different actions simultaneous in a fight scene.

Why? Because a fight scene is chock full of all different sorts of actions, each of which takes a different amount of time. If one action takes a tenth of a second and another takes two seconds, the action will feel distorted if the author asserts that they happen simultaneously.

In our example, we've got this gem:

"Arnie ducked his head and spun to the right, simultaneously kicking out furiously with his foot and shouting that Bruce was an ambidextrous excuse for a moron"

You can spin to the right pretty quick. You can kick pretty quick. But how long does it take to shout that bit about the ambidextrous excuse for a moron? (And what would that mean, anyway?) All this action CAN'T happen simultaneously. So it's a heinous crime to say that it does.

e) On to the next rule: "Favor completed verbs over continuing action verbs." In other words, use simple past tense verbs such as "kicked" or "punched" or "shouted" rather than those pesky participles such as "kicking" or "punching" or "shouting".

The reason for this is simple. When you say "Arnie kicked Bruce," you imply that it happened quickly and it's now over. Which is what the camera would show. When you say "Arnie was kicking Bruce," you imply that it's going on and on and on. But a kick happens in a few tenths of a second, so your mind has no option except to see the kick happening over and over and over again. Or happening in super Slo-Mo. Either way, it's not much like a fight any more.

In this paragraph, we've got the worst of all possible worlds, because we're mixing completed verbs with continuing action verbs:

"Arnie ducked his head and spun to the right, simultaneously kicking out furiously with his foot and shouting"

Such horrible writing is enough to make grown men cry.

f) On to the next rule violation: "Show the fastest stuff first." What that means is that when you sequence a group of events that are happening at roughly the same time, show those that happen fastest before you show those that happen slowest. Look at this segment:

"none of the stuff Arnie tried actually worked because he was lying there on the ground wondering if he was ever going to see Cindy Lou Who again, who had grown up to be quite cute, even if she was a dumb mutt in seventh grade, and also he was screaming in agony."

Obviously there are multiple problems here, but note this: we show Arnie ruminating about Cindy Lou Who (which could take a couple seconds, given what a slow wit Arnie is) and THEN we see him screaming in agony (which he should be doing pretty fast, with all the kicks he's getting.) If you're going to show these, it's better to show him screaming first and THEN show him ruminating.

g) The next rule is extremely important: "For every action, show a reaction." This means that if Bruce punches 6 times and Arnie jabs back 6 times, then you need to shuffle them together, rather than lumping all the punches together and then all the jabs. Look at the text:

"Want some more, you little lout?" Bruce said as he kicked Arnie in the kidneys about fifteen times and then grabbed his head and pounded it on the ground. All this time, Arnie was jabbing Bruce in places like the groin and stomach

So Bruce is performing a whole bunch of actions all lumped together, and only then do we see any of the reactions from Arnie, which are also all lumped together. The net effect is to smooth out the fight sequence into a bland oatmeal of muffled actions. You can't see a scene like this in your head. Oh, sure, you see SOMETHING. But it's nothing like what the author intended.

h) The final rule is: "Use interior monologue and dialogue to set the pace." Pace is important in a fight scene. It's utterly unrealistic to show a nonstop flurry of actions and reactions.

Real fighters will exchange a series of punches or kicks or whatever. Then they'll back off and look each

other over, catching their breath and watching for weaknesses. A real fight has ebbs and flows in the pacing. You show the faster parts of the scene by short sentences that show ONLY the actions and reactions. You show the slower parts of the scene by longer sentences that show actions and reactions INTERSPERSED with interior monologue and dialogue.

Your goal in a fight scene is to make it take just about as long to read as it would take to happen in real time. You do that by controlling the pacing.

In the fight scene shown, we have blocks of both interior monologue and dialogue tossed in at the very height of the action.

The example I've given does not even deserve an F. It's too horrible to merit a grade at all. It's also too horrible to even try rewriting. The most merciful thing we can do is forget it ever happened. (Go ahead, forget all about Arnie and Bruce right now.)

Next month, we'll study a good fight scene from a real novel and see how the author used the rules to control the scene.

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## 6) What's New At [AdvancedFictionWriting.com](http://AdvancedFictionWriting.com)

I'm in the final stages of preparing my next product, Fiction 201, for release. I was hoping to be able to announce it today, but "things" have come up to delay me just a bit. (See details below.) I can tell you that Fiction 201 will be a worthy sequel to Fiction 101. The content is more advanced, of course, and there will be about 50% MORE content. My hope is to keep the price the SAME. Stay tuned for more details in about a week. When you see a Special Note from me in your email, be ready to act fast!

In my personal life, things have continued on at the same hectic pace as I've had all year. As most of you know, my family and I have recently relocated ourselves from San Diego to the Portland area (actually, southern Washington, but we're very close to Portland).

I should mention why we're moving, since at least one of my friends assumed it was for some sort of financial reason. Nope. It's for family reasons.

My wife has been wanting for the last couple of years to move closer to her parents, who are getting older EVERY SINGLE DAY. We began making plans more than a year ago for me to quit my irritating day job so we

could move. But my former employer took matters into its own grimy little paws at the end of October last year and laid off my entire team. Since that happy day, I've done a bit of consulting and have launched useful products such as Fiction 101 to sell on my web site, and so all ends are being properly met.

In any event, we completed the sale on our house in San Diego at the end of August and have been looking for a new house in southern Washington since then.

WE FOUND IT! This weekend we made an offer on a house that we love. The sellers have accepted our offer, and we've jumped through the appropriate hoops for our loan and we hope to take possession by the end of the month. I'm going to have an office! With a door on it! It's a nice house, but it's an INCREDIBLE yard. I'll post pictures on my web site when we get moved in.

I'll note that the current real estate market is harsh. It's brutal for sellers right now. When we sold our house, we settled for a LOT less money than we hoped to get. Now that we're buying, we're recouping that. We've had our eye on this particular house for two months, and the asking price has dropped like a rock. I reckon we've saved about as much on this purchase as we lost in making our sale.

At the end of the day, it's not about the money, though. It's about whether you like where you live and whether you get along with the people you're living with. So I think we're coming out of this OK. But it has been a pretty exhausting year for us.

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7) Steal This E-zine!

This E-zine is free, and I personally guarantee it's worth 144,000 times what you paid for it. I invite you to "steal" it, but only if you do it nicely . . .

Distasteful legal babble: This E-zine is copyright Randall Ingermanson, 2006.

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.

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My new web site: <http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com>

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Randy Ingermanson  
Publisher, Advanced Fiction Writing E-zine

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