
The Advanced Fiction Writing E-zine

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Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius.

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

Those of you who have joined in the past month (nearly 500 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, don't be shy -- 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>

After last month's issue, which contained an article on writing conferences, a reader wrote to me asking EXACTLY what goes on in a writing conference. Since I have just returned from teaching at a major conference, this month's issue will be a special edition dedicated exclusively to dissecting a writing conference.

2) Anatomy of a Writing Conference (Special Report)

This e-zine is a few days late because I was at a large writing conference in California for an entire week. I got home three days ago and have been in recovery since then.

Every writing conference in the world is different, and yet every writing conference in the world is alike, both at the same time.

Different conferences target different niches, appeal to different writers, attract different editors and agents, line up different topics, and schedule events in different ways.

And yet all conferences are designed to help writers get published. Any conference that forgets to help writers is a conference that will go out of business quickly.

Back in 1996, I decided that I was tired of the way my writing career was going. I'd been writing for 8 years and hadn't sold a blessed thing. I thought I was due to get published. I decided to invest some serious money in my career. I decided to start going to a major writing conference and to keep going every year until I broke in.

It paid off very well. Three years later, I went to that same writing conference with two recent book contracts in hand. I won Writer of the Year that year and my career has been on a crazy ride ever since.

A quick word about niche markets. Most writers write for a niche market and may well benefit most from a niche conference.

For example, if you write romances, then you'll probably do best at a conference specially designed for romance writers. If you write mysteries, then a conference for mystery writers might be just your ticket. If you write science fiction or fantasy, then an SF/F conference might be the right universe for you.

I write for the Christian market. It's a good market that has grown rapidly in the last decade. So when I decided to go to a major writing conference, I chose the Mount Hermon Christian Writing Conference, near Santa Cruz, California. Mount Hermon is the largest and most prestigious Christian writing conference in the country and it was close to me.

I've been going there ever since, now 12 years in a

row, and have been teaching for the last 5. If you fit in this niche, then Mount Hermon is awesome.

I got back from Mount Hermon 3 days ago. Here is a detailed account of what I did, from the plane ride in until the plane ride out. To protect the privacy of my friends, I'm not going to give any names, other than that of my co-author, which is a matter of public record. And to keep my agent from freaking out, I won't reveal any business details. Everything else is fair game.

Wednesday, March 28: My wife drops me off at the Portland airport with a suitcase bulging with books and another holding a few clothes. Of course, the book suitcase is overweight and I have to repack at the airport. I toss half a dozen books in with my underwear while the airport guy grins at me.

When I get to my gate, I see a writer friend of mine, "Joe," in line. He's not going to the conference; he's going to speak in San Jose to promote his books. We talk about marketing straight through the plane ride. By the time we get off the plane, Joe has a sheetful of ideas I've given him on how to promote his books on the internet. And I've got some hot new ideas of my own.

After collecting my bags, I head out of the terminal. My cell phone rings. It's the driver assigned to pick me up and bring me in. (I'm coming to the conference two days early because I'm on the critique team, and today is the day we'll sort hundreds of manuscripts and assign them each to a faculty member to read.)

Quickly, I'm in the van and talking up a storm. An hour later, when we reach the camp, I've got two new lifelong friends.

I get my room key and leave my bags in the lobby because the critique team meeting is just starting. It's a big group, and within a couple of hours, we've got all manuscripts assigned to somebody. A couple of faculty have had to cancel due to emergencies, so the manuscripts they would have gotten are reassigned to someone else. This requires that somebody scan the manuscripts and figure out who best to receive it.

After the meeting, I wheel my suitcase of books to the bookstore and leave it there. Then I grab my other suitcase and head up to my cabin. I'll be sharing it with four other faculty, but they won't arrive until tomorrow, so for now, I've got it all to myself.

At supper, I spend time renewing friendships with the two dozen early-bird faculty and staff. I know most of them from past years, but a few are new. Pretty quickly, I have a couple of new friends and have got caught up with all the old ones.

After supper, I check email at the wireless hub in Central Lounge and then head up to my room to wrap up the notes for my talks. I'll be teaching on internet marketing and my talks are only half done. By midnight, my notes are all done and I'm happy.

I call home and talk to my wife. She tells me that the stray dog that was on our porch this morning has been hanging around all day and trying to eat our compost heap -- so she fed it. I groan. I really don't want a stray dog, but . . . she couldn't just let it starve. And it's a gorgeous dog, a young Irish Setter. But I still don't want a dog.

Thursday, March 29: After breakfast, I get my laptop and check email. I'm hoping to break away for a long walk in the redwoods. Mount Hermon has spectacular trees and every year I vow to spend some time looking at them. But I quickly get enmeshed in conversation with some of the other faculty. Before you know it, noon has arrived and we head off to lunch.

By now, more faculty and many students have arrived. The conference doesn't start until noon tomorrow, but it's become popular to arrive here a day early and hang out. At lunch, I talk to more of my friends. Afterward, I get my conference notebook and consign my books into the bookstore.

By mid-afternoon, a walk in the woods has become a forgotten cause. I'm seeing new friends arrive every few minutes. Hugs are administered in massive quantities. The afternoon passes in a blur, then supper. I go to the faculty meeting. This year we have 70 faculty! I know many of the teachers from past years, but there are plenty of new faces. I'm NOT good with face recognition, so my brain is on overload by the time the meeting ends.

By 9 PM, I'm hanging out in Central Lounge. I shoot one of my story ideas at one of my friends and she loves it. I'm glad, because I plan to run it past some editors this weekend, and it's nice to know the idea isn't horrible.

By midnight, I'm back in my cabin and calling my wife. The stray dog has settled in. My wife has put up "Lost Dog" signs all around the neighborhood and the kids are looking glum whenever the phone rings. I think we've been adopted by this pup.

Friday, March 30: Breakfast is noisy and enthusiastic. I can't walk ten feet through the cafeteria without seeing friends or having my name called. I'm getting excited about the conference.

I check email in Central Lounge and talk with a few friends. A writer asks me to look at her work. Her name

is "Jane," and it takes me about five minutes to figure out that she's extremely talented and has a strong manuscript. I suggest one agent and one editor who I'm certain will love her work and tell her I'll introduce her to anyone she wants to meet. Jane is jazzed because she hasn't realized until now just how good she is. I'm jazzed because the conference hasn't even started and I've already found a writer who can be helped. I come to these things because I like connecting the right writer with the right editor or agent. Most unpublished writers just aren't ready yet, so it's really fun to find one who is.

By lunchtime, Mount Hermon is a sea of writers. Total attendance is a record 450 this year, and the cafeteria is bulging. The mood is one of high hilarity, as it is every year. Several people are asking me what grand scam I plan to pull on April Fool's Day, which is this coming Sunday. I've got nothing in mind, but nobody believes me when I say so. I retired from scams four years ago after lucking into one so absurd and so perfect that it makes no sense to try for another. Best to go out at the top of your game, that's what I think.

After lunch, attendees split into two groups. First-timers go to the main auditorium for orientation. Alumni go to a smaller building to learn how to get the most out of the conference. I slide into the Alumni meeting late. It's a good talk, but I've heard it several times before, so I daydream about what this conference will bring.

I mentally review the email my agent sent me yesterday, letting me know which editors are currently considering proposals of mine. There are about eight editors I'd love to make appointments with, but I doubt I'll have time for all of them. I decide to make appointments with whomever I run into first. Mount Hermon has no formal appointment system. To make an appointment with an editor or agent, all you have to do is ask. They don't have to say yes, but in 12 years, I've only been refused once.

The meeting breaks at 2:45. I walk out the door and spot one of my editor friends, a guy I'll call Editor A. I ask if he's got time for an appointment tomorrow afternoon. He does. We mark our schedules and then compare notes on the work of "Jane," the writer I met this morning. Editor A received her manuscript as a pre-submission to the conference. He's already read it and thinks her writing is excellent. I'm happy because I told her this morning that he'd like it.

The next event is the kickoff meeting with everybody in the Main Auditorium. The purpose is to introduce all the faculty to all the students. We get introduced in groups and then the director goes over last-minute changes to the schedule.

We break for the first workshops of the day. At Mount

Hermon, there are major morning tracks that run for 8 hours of instruction through the conference. Those give you a lot of continuity with one instructor. Then in the afternoons, there are one-hour workshops that you can pick and choose at random. There are 12 major morning tracks and 70 workshops. The number of choices is vast and nearly overwhelming.

The one oddball that doesn't fit this pattern is the Career Track, which runs both mornings AND afternoons. It's only open to multipublished book authors. I'll be teaching for several hours in this track, so my plan for the conference is to attend this track whenever I'm not required to be elsewhere.

I head for the brand-new Fieldhouse and join about three dozen other writers for the first session of the Career Track. I spot an editor I don't know very well, Editor B. It's been quite a long time since I talked with her, and I know from my agent that she's got a couple of my proposals on her desk back home, so I ask for an appointment. We figure out that we both have time on Monday afternoon, and we mark our calendars.

I should note my philosophy about editors here. I see many writers at conferences who look at editors as targets to be cornered and pitched at. All too many writers don't even seem to know the editors' names and simply refer to them by their publishing houses.

Please, please, puhleeze! Editors are real people and you need to treat them like real people. Relationships are very important in publishing. Your relationship with each editor will be different. Some will never be more than casual acquaintances. Others will become good friends. A rare few may become close buddies. None of these relationships can be forced. It's downright silly to try. Either you'll click with an editor or you won't.

The important thing is to simply be yourself and spend a bit of time with various editors. You'll find out quick enough whether you hit it off or you don't. You do NOT need to be bosom buddies with an editor to get published. What you do need is the editor's respect.

I don't generally pitch things to editors. I regard that as my agent's job. I prefer to spend the bulk of my time just learning how editors think, what kind of books they like, what kind of person they are.

Enough on philosophy and back to the Career Track. We spend the first hour doing a little hands-on project with clay that mainly serves to get the writers talking with each other. Soon, we're all having fun and talking. When the class breaks up, I make an appointment with Editor C, whom I know very well. She's also got one of my proposals on her desk back home. We mark our calendars for Sunday afternoon and head for supper.

Because I'm a faculty member, at meal-times I have an assigned table with my name on it. Whoever wants to sit with me can come sit at my table and be sure of spending an hour with me. My policy at meals is to go around the table and spend about five minutes talking with each person to see how the conference is going, what their goals are, and if their needs are being met. I require everyone else at the table to give full attention to whomever I'm talking with. This system keeps the noise down and makes sure that nobody gets overlooked.

After supper, there's a short meeting to kick off the Buddy System. This is run by volunteers, who spend time before the conference matching up newbies with experienced conferees. I've got two Buddies for this conference. I've already exchanged email with both of them in the previous few weeks. Now we meet in person and chat. Both of them are well-prepared for the conference.

Next comes the first evening General Session, featuring Dick Foth, the keynote speaker. I've heard him speak before. He was excellent then and he's excellent now.

By 9 PM, the General Session is over and we're all headed over to the cafeteria for a Meet and Greet between the faculty and the writers. The gathering is crowded and very noisy -- not my best environment. I spend an hour mingling in small groups, shouting to be heard over the din, and then head off to Central Lounge. It's quieter there and a good place to talk and meet new people.

Saturday, March 31: I wake up early and evaluate a few of the manuscripts I've been assigned to critique. Then I'm off to breakfast and then to the Career Track.

One of the rules of the Career Track is that "What's said in the Career Track stays in the Career Track." The idea is that writers need to be able to say things and ask questions without fear that what they say will be circulated elsewhere. It's a good rule, but it means that I can't give a detailed report here. In the morning, there's an editor's panel in which the moderator reads a series of pitches that were submitted anonymously before the conference. The editors talk about the pitches and show us a bit of what goes on in a real decision-making process. I wish I could tell you what I learned, but it's really not allowed.

After the editor's panel, I make an appointment with Editor D. I don't know him terribly well, and he's not currently considering any proposals of mine, but he's a good guy and I've been wanting to get to know him better. I'd like to understand better what kind of projects he loves.

Next up on the Career Track schedule is a talk on how

to behave at the annual bookseller's convention. This is really eye-opening for me, because I can see there are a lot of things I could do better. Writing conferences are for writers; bookseller's conventions are for bookstore owners, and I've always felt pretty small there.

I spend part of the talk multi-tasking -- listening to the talk while wrapping up evaluations of my pile of manuscripts, because they're due back to the critique center by noon. I generally spend about 15 minutes reviewing each manuscript, but it takes longer when I'm also listening to a lecture. When I finish my manuscripts, I walk back to the critique center and turn them in. I've asked some of them to find me and make an appointment, because a handwritten evaluation always seems to be too little. I much prefer to talk through a critique.

Lunch goes well, and then I'm off to another lecture in the Career Track. More good information, this time on the painful subject of branding.

At 3:30, I cut out and meet with Editor A. It's my policy to not discuss the contents of such appointments in public, but I can tell you it is a very good meeting. I now understand Editor A's interests a whole lot better, and he understands mine.

I head to the critique center to do some walk-in critiques. This is one of the best features of the Mount Hermon conference. Just about any time of the day, at least one member of the critique team is on duty to do an on-the-spot critique for anyone who wants one. First-come, first-served. Between 4 PM and 6 PM every day, the entire critique team is available.

When I arrive, the critique center is hopping. I do four critiques in a row and each one is FUN. Some of the writers are people I've worked with before, and it's great to see how they've improved. Others bring me manuscripts that I evaluated this morning, and I get to spend a lot more time with them now. Verbal critiques are far more effective than written ones, in my opinion.

At supper, I meet more new people and deal out encouragement. This meal is very important, because by now, most of the pre-submitted manuscripts have been returned, and some writers are feeling discouraged if they didn't get the response they were hoping for. Writers often come to conferences expecting a contract to be miraculously offered. The reality is that relationships are often miraculously built here, but book deals rarely are. Many contracts will follow in the months to come, but not here. Think contacts, not contracts, when you go to a conference.

My table is in good spirits, and there's no need to console the disconsolate. I make an appointment to meet

with a writer later this evening to critique his work.

After the evening's General Session, I head to the Soda Fountain to do the critique. We wind up spending an hour going over the writer's work and talking about a lot of other things.

Eventually, I head over to Central Lounge to hang out until midnight. Writers are the most interesting people in the world and when they get with other writers, the introversion comes off.

Sunday, April 1: I'm scheduled to give two lectures and one long Q&A session today in the Career Track, so this is my busy day. My first lecture is at 9 AM, and I begin it by announcing that as of tomorrow, I'll be joining the "ABC Literary Agency". (I've disguised the name of the agency here, but it's a real one.) The room erupts in cheering and clapping. I'm shocked to realize that my friends believe I might actually consider being an agent, a job I have no talent for. At the height of the celebration, I holler, "April Fools!" It gets a good round of laughs.

I then settle in to my lecture on "Getting Phenomenal Traffic On Your Web Site." It's a pretty intense pace, and folks are taking notes feverishly and asking lots of great questions. My time is up before I'm finished with my notes, but I promise to finish the topic in my second talk this afternoon. I'm feeling good, because my anxiety level has been way low for this talk.

We break for church. Some Christian writing conferences have a very abbreviated set of workshops on Sundays, but Mount Hermon has a fairly full load. However, it does break the Sunday pace with a meditative one-hour church service just before lunch. By tradition, the Mount Hermon conference always happens on the weekend of Palm Sunday. I can't think of any better place to spend Palm Sunday than at Mount Hermon.

At lunch, one of the students from the class I taught this morning asks me a tough question about internet marketing. After some discussion, we agree to hold an impromptu open clinic this evening and invite anyone who wants to come brainstorm with us.

After lunch, there's a very short faculty meeting, and then we're all off to the afternoon workshops. I've received new manuscripts to evaluate, so I spend the first workshop listening to a lecture and reading through my stack.

By mid-afternoon, it's my turn to speak on the topic "Creating a Phenomenal Marketing Plan For Your Book." It's a follow-up to this morning's talk, and there is a LOT of interest. With all the questions, I go a bit overtime. It's OK, because the schedule calls for me to do 45 minutes of Q&A after my talk. By the end of the

session, we're all on information overload.

After the session, I have my appointment with Editor C. Once again, it's a very good meeting, but I can't give any details here.

At supper, one of my former mentoring students sits at my table. I've been looking for her the entire conference, because I know she's ready for an agent and I want to introduce her to two in particular. (I only do such introductions when I'm sure a writer is ready to be published.) After the meal, we pop over to the next table and I introduce her to an agent friend of mine. They make an appointment, and then we race over to another table and I introduce her to another agent. Either agent would do a great job for her. If they both like her work, then her decision will come down to which agent she clicks with better.

After another inspiring General Session, I head to the Soda Fountain, buy a Snapple, and settle in to brainstorm marketing ideas for the web site of Writer A. She's got a terrific platform with a lot of potential, so this is easy. We've got a crowd of 6 or 8 others listening in, and it's really fun popping out ideas. After an hour, we switch to Writer B and her addition of an e-zine to an already excellent blog. Then it's on to Writer C.

When it's all over, I head back to Central Lounge for the usual late-night chit-chat. It's been a long day, but a great day. And I've been assigned two more manuscripts to critique, which I'm too frazzed to look at right now.

Monday, April 2: I drag into breakfast late and get into a spirited conversation with another faculty member whom I've never met before. Writing conferences somehow enable instant friendships. I don't understand that, but I'm not complaining.

I sit through another round of morning lectures while I evaluate my last two manuscripts. At the mid-morning break, I scurry off to the critique center and turn them in. On the way out, one of my subscribers of this e-zine catches me and introduces me to another one. We've already "met" by email, but this is the first time to meet in person. It occurs to me once again that I have the best job in the world.

The second morning workshop on how to deal with your editor rushes by, then lunch, then the first afternoon workshop on numbers and what they mean in the book publishing industry. We're now heading into the last 24 hours of the conference, and people are dragging. My energy level is still high, but it's mostly adrenaline now.

I meet with Editor B and Editor D, back to back. As

always, the focus is on getting to know the editors, not on pitching manuscripts. The truth is that manuscripts pitch themselves if you just relax. Again, I can't give details here, but both meetings go very well.

One final note on meetings with editors, for those writers who find the very notion terrifying. Always remember this: "The editor knows how to dance." What I mean is that most editors have had hundreds or thousands of appointments with writers. They know how to ask you the right questions to find out who you are, what you write, where you are in your career, and whether you're a good fit for their house. So let the editor lead! All you have to do is follow, and be yourself.

Of course you should be prepared to talk about your current projects. But let the editor lay the groundwork first. At a certain point, he or she will ask what you're writing. Then give a brilliant, incisive, insightful answer that shows the editor clearly that you have a Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius. But hey, no pressure.

After my meetings, I head to the critique center and do a few more walk-in critiques. As always, this is fun. The traffic today is slower, because a lot of people are wearing down.

Supper whips by, and then it's time for the General Session. The meeting begins with presentation of various awards. Two of my good friends win Writer of the Year and the Pacesetter Award. Another friend wins a Special Recognition Award. It's a good night for my friends.

After the General Session, we all head to the cafeteria for the booksigning. By tradition, I sit next to my friend and co-author John Olson so we can sign copies of the two books we wrote years ago, as well as copies of the books we've written alone. A couple of hours zip by and then the party's over.

I head over to Central Lounge to hang out with friends. This is the last night of the conference, and by tradition, it runs very late.

Tuesday, April 3: I crawl into breakfast feeling like toast. Luckily, nobody notices. After breakfast, I sit through another Career Track workshop.

I cut out of the workshop early to go pick up my books from the bookstore. The store has sold about half of what I brought. I lug the rest back to my room and do a lightning job of packing. Then it's time to head to the last General Session. The keynote speaker has an early flight, so he ends promptly on time and then whisks out the door to catch his shuttle.

On the way to lunch, my buddy John Olson asks if I need a ride back to the airport. I've got a shuttle ride lined up, so I cancel that. Lunch flies by while John and I discuss our upcoming Alaskan cruise where we'll be doing a writing seminar at sea. (For details on that, see this web page:)
http://www.advancedfictionwriting.com/home/cruise_info.php

People are already catching shuttles to the airport, and the fizz is rapidly draining out of this conference. The general mood is "exhausted elation." Most of the writers I've talked to have had a great weekend. The beginners are going home determined to put into practice all the new skills they've learned. The intermediate writers are heading back with a list of editors and agents who've asked them to "send me that proposal." Many of the advanced writers have met agents or editors they really clicked with. Books will be sold and agent contracts signed as a result of this conference.

Many of the published authors are going home with new direction on what to write next, after a series of meetings with editors.

And me? What did I get out of the conference? All of the above. But more importantly, stronger relationships with old friends and a whole bunch of new friends.

As usual, however, the conference isn't over for me yet. On the way to the airport, I'm strategizing with John Olson. It's a tradition we've followed many times over the last 11 years.

A side note: John and I met in the registration line at Mount Hermon in 1996, two Ph.D. level scientists who wanted to write fiction. Obeying the usual nerd-herding instinct, we became instant friends. In the years that followed, we brainstormed before conferences, met editors, commiserated over rejections, rejoiced over the tiniest signs of interest, agonized over proposals, wordsmithed sample chapters, celebrated first contracts, got published, co-authored two books together, won awards, ran scams, and had a lot of fun. Ultimately, we both broke away from our day jobs and are finding our way in the world of writing.

As we drive up to San Jose, John and I are figuring out what we're going to do next. I'm not at liberty to say what we decided. But I can't WAIT till next year.

Every writing conference in the world is different. Every writing conference in the world is alike. There's got to be a conference somewhere that's perfect for you, no matter what niche you write in. Find that conference and commit to attending it. It's an investment in your career and in yourself.

3) Watch For My New Blog . . .

Sometime in the next week, I expect to launch my new blog, the Advanced Fiction Writing Blog.

Why a blog, when I already have an e-zine? Simple. To reach more people. Some people prefer reading blogs. Others prefer e-zines. To each his own.

I've been wanting to start a blog for some time, but I had to put it on hold because I just didn't have the time. A good blog requires time and effort, and I just didn't have it while I was relocating and updating my web sites and launching my corporation and all that yucky stuff.

Now that I've completed rebuilding the infrastructure of my life, I can put the required time into blogging.

I hope you'll love the new blog. Watch your email in-box for a Special Announcement!

4) What's New At AdvancedFictionWriting.com

Last month I finished revamping my personal web site and moving it to a new domain at:
<http://www.Ingermanson.com>

I also burned a LOT of time analyzing the alleged "Jesus family tomb." In the March issue, I told you a bit about my statistical analysis of this beast. A lot of water has gone under the bridge since then. As it turned out, my first article drew me scads of attention. (To see how much attention, Google the phrase "Jesus family tomb Ingermanson" and see how many pages Google indexes under this keyphrase. As of today, it's over 600 pages, and climbing.)

Pretty quickly, I was fielding emails from quite a few people, including some major New Testament scholars. It ended up with me doing an extremely detailed analysis which you can read about here:
<http://www.ingermanson.com/jesus/art/stats2.php>

The results were gratifying. My article, which I coauthored with a grad student at the University of Chicago, appears to have convinced just about everyone that the "Jesus family tomb" is Xtremely unlikely to be the final resting place of Jesus of Nazareth.

I will note that if you Google the phrase "Jesus equation," my two articles are #2 and #3 in the search results. I'll explain how I achieved such a high ranking in the next issue of my marketing newsletter, the Mad Genius Writer E-zine. If you don't get that e-zine, check it out here:
<http://www.MadGeniusWriter.com>

5) Steal This E-zine!

This E-zine is free, and I personally guarantee it's worth over a billion 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, 2007.

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 are two places to subscribe:
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My fiction site: <http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com>

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Randy Ingermanson
Publisher, Advanced Fiction Writing E-zine
