
The Advanced Fiction Writing E-zine

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

This is the July issue of the Advanced Fiction Writing E-zine. The normally scheduled date for this issue was midnight on July 3. However, I figured that all my US readers would be busy blowing up fireworks on July 4, so I decided to hold this issue back for a week to let the dust settle. August's issue will come out on the normal schedule, the first Tuesday of the month.

Those of you who have joined in the past month (about 350 of you have joined since the 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>

What's in this issue:

Have you been reading my Advanced Fiction Writing Blog lately? If not, I'll give you a quick recap of what you missed.

Several months ago, I began a series of articles on creating characters. This month I'll talk about how characters and plots grow up together.

We've talked about marketing many times in this e-zine, and I've often said that marketing starts with the brutal fact that "nobody cares about you." This is true, but there's another side to consider. In a very real sense, "marketing is all about you." We'll talk about that paradox this month.

2) Recent Blog Articles

My new Advanced Fiction Writing Blog has gelled into an active community of writers with hundreds of daily readers and often dozens of comments. Here's a recap of some recent things we've discussed there in the past month:

In early June, I asked my blog readers what stage of their writing career they were in, and what was their biggest obstacle at the moment. It turned out that a number of writers were feeling oppressed by the zillions of rules that well-meaning teachers give them. That generated a discussion for several days on the "rules" of writing and how and when to break them.

We then talked about why "bad" books get published when there are tons of good books that don't.

That led us into a long discussion on the importance of marketing and branding for all writers, even pre-published ones. Not surprisingly, a lot of my blog readers have felt some angst about branding. I interviewed a couple of my author friends who I feel have done a good job branding themselves. We talked about the various branding problems that some of my blog readers are facing now or will face as they head towards publication.

More recently, we've had an extended discussion on the structure of scenes in fiction. There are certain rules of scene structure that an author violates only at extreme peril.

If you've been missing out on my blog, you can read it

here:

<http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com/blog>

3) Creating Characters -- Part 5

In the last few months, we talked about how values, motivations, and goals define a character, and the one thing you must understand in order to write three-dimensional characters. This month we're going to talk about the process of creating characters.

This column is prompted by an email I received today from one of this e-zine's subscribers, asking about how exactly you develop characters.

Every writer is different, of course, so I can't give a set of rules that will guarantee you'll come out with interesting characters. Writing is not paint by numbers. But I can give you some general guidelines.

Personally, I think characters are completely tied up with plot. I develop my characters right alongside my storyline.

For starters, every one of my main characters will have some sort of goal that motivates them to action. In my view, if your character doesn't WANT something, then you've got a boring character that nobody is going to want to read about. Conversely, if you've got a character who really, desperately WANTS something, then that's an interesting character.

Some examples:

Can a machine be an interesting character? Yes . . . if that machine is an android who wants very badly to kill a woman named Sarah Connor before she has a son named John who will save the world from androids. That's the storyline for the robot played by Arnold Schwarzenegger in TERMINATOR.

Can a six-year-old boy be an interesting character? Yes . . . if that boy wants to get away from his sadistic older brother and go to Battle School where he has a chance to play war games with other kids and possibly become the hero who will save the earth from the invading alien "Buggers." That's the storyline for Ender Wiggin in ENDER'S GAME.

Can a witless middle-aged mother of five girls be an interesting character? Yes . . . if she's desperate to marry off those daughters before her husband dies, leaving them all penniless. That's the storyline of

Mrs. Bennett, mother of Lizzie Bennett in PRIDE AND PREJUDICE. (And it hardly matters that Papa Bennett is healthy as a horse. For Mama Bennett, the important thing is that he COULD die. Hence, the need for rich husbands, and plenty of them.)

The fact is that most of us, most of the time, play by the rules and live pretty dull lives. But when a person is desperate, when their back is to the wall, when they'll do ANYTHING to get what they want or need, that's when the rules all go out the window. That's when you have a story.

Fiction is driven by people who desperately want something and will do whatever it takes to get it. So that's the first principle of creating characters.

But the second principle is that everybody is different. We have different skills, different talents, different limitations. Ender Wiggin, at six years old, can't possibly travel through time like Arnie, stealing guns, improvising explosions, and shooting up the cops. But Ender is just as lethal, in his own way, on his own turf, because Ender is a brilliant strategist and also knows how to organize teams to get the best out of his underlings.

Mrs. Bennett can't run away from her problems to go to Battle School, but she has plenty of other talents. Such as talking. And, um, talking. And (the truth comes out at last) talking. The woman is a chatterbox and a half, and all that talking only makes things worse for her poor daughters, who desperately don't need Mama messing up their chances at marriage by being a dork in public. Mrs. Bennett's role in life is to demolish her daughters' chances by trying way too hard.

Arnie's robot in TERMINATOR has little talent for small talk of the type Mrs. Bennett excels at. He has a few good lines, but his strength is physical. The guy is well-nigh unstoppable. Shoot him, stab him, burn him -- he just keeps going like the Energizer Bunny From Hell.

Plot comes when you have different characters, each of whom desperately wants something -- and those "somethings" are in conflict. Give each of these characters different skills and your story writes itself. In theory, anyway.

In practice, of course, your characters don't always spring to life in full glory. Sometimes, you've got one character and a weak plot and that's it. Then what do you do?

What you do is ask what sort of character would cause the most grief for the character you've got. That often suggests a new character with particular strengths. Now give that new character a burning desire that's totally at odds with your first character.

Now you've got two strong characters and a strong plot.
Now you've got a story.

So in creating your novel, your characters define your plot, and your plot defines your characters. If you iterate between those a few times, you'll end up with several strong characters, and a dynamite plot.

4) Marketing is About You

It may seem paradoxical for me to write an article with the headline "Marketing is About You." After all, for a long time, I've been saying in this e-zine that one of the fundamental axioms of marketing is that "Nobody cares about you."

How are we supposed to reconcile those two statements?

Well, it's very simple. Yes, it's true that nobody cares about you -- yet. The goal of marketing is to TEACH them to care about you.

But you don't do that by talking about yourself. Quick -- think back to the last party you went to. There was a guy there who only talked about himself. Remember? He was buttonholing anybody he could latch onto and telling them all about a) his great Amway products, or b) his amazingly cool job designing relational databases, or c) how well he's doing after his divorce, or d) his fabulous collection of spider webs. Or whatever. It was all about him.

Remember what tricks you had to pull to get away from that guy? Yeah, you remember.

There was another guy there who, as luck would have it, knew a whole lot about something you really cared about. You remember him, right? It turned out you were both really super-interested in a) the Yankees, or b) French cooking, or c) gardening, or d) great literary novels. Or whatever. You really hit it off because this guy cared about stuff you cared about. Plus, he was just fun to be around.

Remember how you barely got started talking before it was time to leave? Yeah, you remember.

Now what's the difference here? Guy #1 may well have been fun to be around, but you never found out, because he was so obsessed with talking about stuff you didn't care about. Guy #2 was definitely fun to be around, but you only discovered that because he was interested in the same stuff you're interested in.

When it comes to marketing your work, it's absolutely true that "Nobody cares about you." But that sentence is really incomplete. It should really read, "Nobody cares about you, UNTIL they discover a common interest AND they find that you're fun to be around."

In the past, when I've talked about marketing, I've focused a lot on the first part -- that common interest. If you've got a great web site on a) the Yankees, or b) French cooking, or c) gardening, or d) great literary novels, or whatever, then people who are interested in your topic will come to your site.

That's all good -- traffic is essential -- but it's not enough. People will VISIT your site for information, but they'll STAY for you.

That's why I say that "Marketing is about you." Because much as you love the Yankees or escargot or zucchini or Austen, what you really want is for people to read your novels. Which they will do if they like you and if your novels are even remotely related to their interests.

Here's where it gets tricky. How are you supposed to get people to like you?

Strictly speaking, you can't make people like you. What you can do is be yourself. You're a writer, and therefore you are automatically unique, entertaining, and fun to be around. Be yourself. Don't try to be Stephen King or Tom Clancy or Danielle Steel.

Be yourself. A certain number of people will like you. Those people are your natural fans. Tragically, a certain number of other people won't like you. The only way to get them to like you is to be somebody else, which would probably alienate your real fans. So don't even bother. Just be yourself. Focus on making your web site (or your blog) reflect your unique, entertaining, fun personality.

If that ultimately means that you only have ten real fans, then maybe you'll never write a bestseller, but you'll have nine more fans than most people do. And you'll have the satisfaction of being authentic.

On the other hand, you might end up with thousands or tens of thousands of fans -- people who like the real you. Those are just the sort of people who'll buy your novels.

All of this means, of course, that you need to figure out who you really are, what you're truly interested in, and how best to communicate all that to the world via your web site.

There's a word for the process of figuring all that out, the infamous "B-word" -- "branding."

If there is anything that has polarized writers in the last ten years, it's the subject of branding. Some writers spend inordinate amounts of time agonizing over their "brand". Others sneer at the whole notion, figuring that your brand will find you.

The truth is somewhere in the middle. An excellent brand may attach itself to you, if you're lucky. Then again, it's just as likely that a perfectly muddled and incoherent brand may latch on to you.

My opinion is that it's nice to be lucky, but you should also take steps to make your own luck. (In exactly the same way, an excellent agent may find you, if you're lucky, but it still makes sense to do your part to find a good one. Right?)

Likewise with a brand. You can do nothing and hope people just naturally figure out who you are and what your writing is all about. But people don't always understand you perfectly, and so the end result might be that nobody really knows what you stand for.

Unless YOU take the time to figure out who you are, what you do, and why you do it, nobody else is likely to do that hard work for you. So you need to do it.

I'll say it again. Marketing your books is about marketing YOU. And marketing you means creating a recognizable brand for your writing that helps you communicate to people who and what you are and what you write.

Want to get started on thinking about your brand right now? Take out a pad of paper and answer three questions:

- 1) Who are you?
- 2) What do you write?
- 3) Why do you write it?

You don't have to answer those completely today. Your answers don't have to be perfect. But if you put them on paper, it'll start a process that will eventually lead you to your brand. And then you'll know how to market yourself effectively.

Branding and marketing don't happen in one day. It takes time and effort to figure it all out. But once you do, selling yourself to an agent, an editor, and the reading public will become a whole lot easier.

5) What's New At AdvancedFictionWriting.com

As you can tell by the above article on marketing, I've recently turned my attention to the much-loved and much-hated subject of "branding." This is a subject

I've neglected for most of my career, and that's been a mistake. But it's never too late to do what you desperately need to do.

In the month of June, I worked with strategic planning expert Allison Bottke to create a teleseminar on "Branding for Writers." We've now added that as #5 in our popular series on "Strategic Planning for Writers." You can read all about the whole series here:
<http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com/links/clean.php>

While working with Allison on the teleseminar, I did some hard rethinking of my own brand. The branding for my novels has been in disarray for a long time. But I've done some soul-searching and I've now got a new direction for my fiction. I'll be rebuilding my brand for my novels from the ground up in the coming months.

I also took a look at the branding for my Advanced Fiction Writing web site, which includes this e-zine and my blog. My Advanced Fiction Writing brand has been pretty well-focused, but not perfectly so. One problem was that some of my articles on writing have been on my personal web site for a long time. (I wrote them long before I launched this e-zine.) I've now moved those articles, including the famous "Snowflake article" to my Advanced Fiction Writing site. And I'm taking some steps to increase my brand recognition.

The lesson here is that you can have multiple brands -- if you have the time and energy to build them both. Viva la branding!

6) Steal This E-zine!

This E-zine is free, and I personally guarantee it's worth at least 1844 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:
My personal web site: <http://www.Ingermanson.com>
My fiction site: <http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com>

7) Reprint Rights

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

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Randy Ingermanson
Publisher, Advanced Fiction Writing E-zine
