
The Advanced Fiction Writing E-zine

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What's in This Issue

- 1) Welcome to the Advanced Fiction Writing E-zine!
 - 2) The Importance of StoryWorld
 - 3) Those Brutal Numbers
 - 4) What's New At [AdvancedFictionWriting.com](http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com)
 - 5) Steal This E-zine!
 - 6) Reprint Rights
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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 300 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 read the final book in the Harry Potter series? What magic made Harry fly off the shelves? This month, I'll talk about the importance of StoryWorld.

I'll also talk about those brutal numbers. You made have heard a certain frightening set of statistics that have been making the rounds over the last few months. What do those numbers mean for you and me, normal writers who are just trying to get our books out on the shelves? And . . . how do you beat the odds?

2) The Importance of StoryWorld

Are you a Harry Potter fan? Did you join the zillions of zealots who waited till midnight to get Book 7 in the series?

I was on a cruise when the book came out, but the first thing I did when I got off the boat was to head for the store and grab my copy. Copies, actually -- one for me, two for my kids.

Why? What captivated me with this series? What compelled millions of other fans to stand in long lines to get their books? What makes the Harry Potter books work?

After all, if you look around on the web, you'll find all sorts of Muggle-headed critics who claim that J.K. Rowling's style is "clunky" and that she uses (gasp) adverbs too much.

And yet there's something magical about this series. I'm a huge fan of Harry and Ron and Hermione and Neville and Luna and Ginny.

What makes Harry Potter fly?

Is it humor? That's part of it, no doubt. The books have plenty of comic moments. The day Fred and George left Hogwarts will live forever. But I've read a fair number of books that are funnier. Humor isn't the magic secret of these books.

Is it magic? That's part of it, too, I'm sure. Although all but the dullest readers have got to realize that the magic doesn't actually work. If you've ever absent-mindedly muttered "wingardium leviosa" at the saltshaker while reading a Potter book over a long lunch, you know darn well that saying the words doesn't do a blasted thing.

Is it the extended backstory of all the characters? The endlessly complicated plots? The clever misdirection of the reader's attention? Yes, all of those add to the story. But if you want deep characters, dive into Dostoevsky. If you want complicated plots, grab a Grisham. If you want misdirection, look into LeCarre.

My opinion is that what makes the Potter books work so well is that the StoryWorld is so carefully imagined and well-presented. An enormous amount of thought has gone into how the magical world works. (Not HOW the magic works, but what rules restrict the magic so that not everything is possible.) Because the problem with magic stories where everything is possible is that there isn't any conflict. Conflict requires obstacles, and obstacles don't exist when you can do anything you want by using the right spell.

You can't Apparate into Hogwarts. You can't conjure up food. You can't block one of the Unforgiveable Curses. You can cast a spell at your enemy with your wand, but it may miss, sometimes by just a whisker. The Mirror of Erised shows you what you want most deeply, but it can be limited to show you only things that you will not use. You can wear an Invisibility cloak, but some wizards can see through it. You can be cured of horrific injuries, but if you die, there is no returning.

Readers of the Potter books know dozens or hundreds of such rules. The rules aren't necessarily logical -- at least not to Muggles. But the rules govern the reality of Harry's world, and some of the rules can override other rules.

All of these rules are shown in action or explained in dialogue. Together, they make a world of magic, but a world in which it simply isn't true that "anything is possible."

That, I think, is the magic of these books. It's a world with just as many rules and constraints as our world -- but they're different rules and constraints. And they all make sense, somehow, some way.

When you open a Harry Potter book, you're in a different world. It's a magical world, but a world with real challenges, real trouble, real evil. It's a world with a backstory of its own. The StoryWorld of this series is virtually a character in its own right.

I'm reminded of another series that created its own StoryWorld supremely well -- The Lord of the Rings. LOTR has even more backstory than the Potter books, and it has a more complex geography, but it has less magic and the rules governing the magic are less clear. But Middle Earth is a major character in LOTR, maybe even the most important character.

In both books, the reader is sucked into a complex StoryWorld that feels utterly different than our own world, and yet strangely familiar.

StoryWorld is immensely important in writing a novel. This is especially true in the fantasy genre, but it's also true for historical fiction, westerns, and science

fiction. Most other genres can be improved by creating a strong StoryWorld.

Over the next few months, I'll be examining StoryWorld in depth in a series of articles.

3) Those Brutal Numbers

In the last few months, it seems like everybody has been quoting the same set of horrifying numbers, a group of sales figures for books in the year 2004.

Why 2004? Because that is the most recent year for which reasonably accurate statistics are available. Yes, really. The book industry is highly computerized, and you might think that current sales numbers should be readily available to anyone who asks for them.

Think again, Virginia. Getting accurate sales numbers from a publisher is harder than getting a reflection from a vampire. So that's why nobody knows last year's numbers, or even the year before last. What surprises me is that the numbers for 2004 are available.

Here are some of those brutal numbers.

In 2004, about 1.2 million books were in print.

80% of those books sold fewer than 100 copies.

98% sold fewer than 5000 copies.

Only a few hundred books sold more than 100,000 copies.

About 10 books sold over a million copies.

A little scary, no? Makes you want to go into some safe, surefire business, such as lion-taming or tornado-chasing.

The numbers aren't QUITE as bad as they look.

One fact to remember is that a LOT of those books were self-published by authors who couldn't find a royalty-paying publisher. So they paid somebody to print up a bunch of copies that wound up in the garage where they will mold in peace for all eternity. Self-pubbed books account for many of those eighty-percenters that sold under 100 copies.

You should also remember that not all of those 1.2 million books were actually PUBLISHED in 2004. In recent years, the number of books published per year has been around 160,000 to 180,000.

Once a book gets published, it stays in print for several years. Towards the end of its life, a book that once sold well may be selling only a few dozen copies per year. That accounts for the rest of those books that sold under 100 copies.

Despite those two caveats, if you fiddle around with those numbers, you can see that only a bit more than 10% of the books published in any given year will sell over 5000 copies.

Feeling better now? I didn't think so.

Any way you slice those numbers, they're bad news. Horrible news, in fact. If you can figure out how to make a living by writing books that only sell 5000 copies apiece, then you need to get a life, a wife, a mortgage, a car, and a few other amenities such as shoes.

As a matter of fact, most writers DON'T make a living writing books. An editor friend of mine recently told me another horrifying statistic. Walk into any bookstore, look around at all the books there, and imagine their authors are all crammed into the store. Now guess how many of those authors earn their living writing books.

Go ahead and think about that for a second before you read on. Make a guess. How many authors earn a living writing books?

The answer is about one percent. That's not "one percent of all the authors who write a book." That's "one percent of authors who get published by royalty-paying publishers and have their books sold in regular stores." A large percentage of all authors these days are actually self-published authors, who DON'T get royalties and DON'T get their books in regular stores. That means that substantially LESS than one percent of all authors make a living writing books.

A few authors, of course, do immensely well. But most authors don't.

Those are the brutal numbers, and I don't think they'll change anytime soon.

What's an author to do (other than go flush your head down the toilet)?

If those numbers demoralize you enough that you decide to quit writing, then you probably should. If you are writing for the money, then you're like Humphrey Bogart, who claimed that he went to Casablanca "for the waters." In a word, you've been misinformed.

But if writing is in your blood, then you can't quit. If you're one of those wretches who would write even if

they didn't pay you, then you're in exactly the right field.

You may still be thinking that there's got to be a way out. All you have to do is get published by one of the big players, right? Surely those big publishers are going to market your book effectively, won't they?

Well, possibly -- but probably not. Remember that big publishers are big because they publish a LOT of books. The marketing and publicity folks at those publishers typically have FAR more on their plate than anybody could handle. (If you don't believe me, talk to these people. They are way overworked and anything you can do to lighten their load will make you a hero.)

The truth is that even if your book gets published at the biggest of the big publishers, it likely won't get the push it deserves because there isn't enough money, enough time, or enough workers to do the job.

It's the same story at mid-size publishers, at small publishers, and at tiny publishers. From what I can see, every publisher in the world overworks and underpays its employees. Vastly.

The problem really boils down to the following two facts:

- * A book will not succeed without good marketing.
- * Publishers put most all of their marketing efforts behind the successful books.

If you put those facts together, you'll immediately see that your book will only succeed if it begins life with a successful marketing plan that YOU create and implement. As soon as your marketing plan starts to succeed, your publisher will start to put time, energy, and money behind it. Then your book has a chance to really take off.

So it's back to that question: What's an author to do?

An agent friend of mine recently reminded me of something I told her a few years ago. I barely remember saying it, but she is quite positive that I told her once at a writing conference: "I hate marketing. I'm no good at marketing. I don't want to market my books."

Guess what? I've changed my tune -- so much so that I can hardly remember saying that. These days, the truth is that I like marketing. The fact is that I'm good at marketing. And I most definitely want to market my books. Matter of fact, the only books I would consider writing these days are ones that I know how to market effectively.

Attitude is everything. You can decide that you hate marketing and that you won't do it and that you prefer

to write books in the 99% that sell poorly. Or you can choose to like marketing and commit to learning all you can about it. It's really up to you.

You can choose your attitude to marketing. You can change it if you've had the wrong attitude. You get to decide.

My challenge this month is very simple: I dare you to DECIDE that you're going to get good at marketing. I dare you. You don't have to take any particular action yet. All I'm daring you to do is to commit yourself to a marketing mentality. Commit to only writing books that you intend to market the heck out of. Commit to success in your writing.

Or you can always go tame lions. It's your choice.

4) What's New At AdvancedFictionWriting.com

In July, my wife and I went on an Alaska cruise and we also ran a writing seminar at sea, which was organized by my writing buddy John Olson and his wife. I'd never been on a cruise before, so I didn't know what to expect, but it went wonderfully well. We had a wonderful time.

The only glitch was that Internet service was Xtremely slow and unreliable while at sea, so I was unable to blog and barely able to check email. I had just time enough to blog about the cruise after my return before I was off again for four days to a writing conference.

I'm back now, and have almost dug out of my email backlog. Under normal circumstances, it's not too hard to deal with 100+ emails per day. But when I'm out of town, especially when internet service is unreliable, those emails pile up until my return. And then the load can feel crushing. If I've been slow responding to your email during the month of July, that's why.

Because of all that, I've not had much time to blog in July. I'll be home for the rest of August, so I hope to get in a lot of blogging through the end of the month as we head into the fall.

5) Steal This E-zine!

This E-zine is free, and I personally guarantee it's worth at least 2300 times what you paid for it. I invite you to "steal" it, but only if you do it nicely . . .

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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 fiction site: <http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com>

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