
The Advanced Fiction Writing E-zine

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Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius.

"Fiction Writing = Organizing + Creating + Marketing"

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

Those of you who have joined in the past month (about 600 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 e-mail that will put you out of your misery.

If you need to change your e-mail address, there's a different link to help you do that.

If you missed a back issue, remember that all previous

issues are archived on my web site at:
<http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com/ezine>

What's in this issue:

The successful novelist needs good organization, good craft, and good marketing. In this issue, we'll talk about each of these in turn.

This is the time of the year when people make New Years Resolutions that will be dead by February. But there's a better way to plan your year. Read my article "What You Did Right Last Year."

Recently I interviewed best-selling novelist James Scott Bell, former fiction columnist for Writer's Digest. Jim has a new book out on writing fiction, titled "Revision & Self-Editing." It's a winner. In this issue, I interview Jim.

Your web site is your billboard to the world. But is anyone reading it? How do you know? How do you get more people to read it? See my article "Web Sites and Blogging, Part 10."

Are you reading my blog? This month, we're applying my Snowflake method to analyze the movie STAR WARS. Join the fun here:
<http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com/blog>

2) Organizing: What You Did Right Last Year

This is the time of year when people traditionally make resolutions for the coming year. It's common to beat yourself up for all the things that are wrong in your life and determine to do better.

We all know that those pesky resolutions rarely last a week.

So let me turn it around. What did you do RIGHT last year?

2008 was a tough, tough year for most people. If you own real estate, it probably went down, way down. If you own stock, it probably went down, way down. If you had a job, you worried about losing it. If you didn't, you had a hard time finding one.

But those things are not you. Your real estate is not you. Your stocks are not you. Your job is not you.

So let's just forget about all those things and think

about you. How did YOU do last year? Did you achieve any of your goals?

Last year you had 366 days to achieve things. And I'll bet you did. Maybe not as many as you wanted. Maybe not as well as you wanted.

But you did achieve things, didn't you? You are far too intelligent to have spent the whole year on the couch watching the Olympics, the presidential campaign, and the economy circling the drain.

What did you achieve last year? Make a list. You might surprise yourself.

Because I run a corporation, I make an annual President's Report that I have to present to the Board of Directors and to the Shareholders. (Both of these august entities are composed of my wife and me, so it's not that horrible of a task.)

This year in my President's Report, I listed all the achievements of my corporation for the year. (I keep a notebook and try to record achievements every week or two, even if they're just little ones.)

It was a nice list. Making the list helped remind me that I did do a few things right in 2008.

The purpose of this exercise is not merely to feel good. I also asked some hard questions of myself. In early 2008, I made a list of projects to take on for the year. I didn't achieve all of them (why not?) And some of the things I did achieve weren't on the list (why did I fail to foresee them?)

They say hindsight is 20-20. There's a lot of truth to that. If I had 2008 to do over, I would plan it differently. The details aren't important for you to know, but the fact is that if I knew a year ago what I know now, I'd have done the year differently.

The nice thing is that I DO know now what I know now. (This is a mathematical theorem which I can prove.) I don't have 2008 to do over again, but I have about 98% of 2009 still to do.

So why can't I do this coming year differently than I did last year?

I can!

And so can you.

What have you learned in the last year? What would you do differently in the last year if you could do it over? Can you do that this year, now that you know better?

In my President's Report, I identified one critical

task which I wish I'd done last year. It's the most important thing I could have done last year, but I didn't complete it. Part of the reason is that I didn't realize just how important it was until July, so the year was more than half gone before I even started.

That task is at the top of my list for this year. And the nice thing is that it's already more than 90% done, so I have a very good chance of finishing it.

What about you? What was the one most important task you should have done last year that you didn't? Is it still that important? Is it possible to do it this year?

The fact is that you don't need New Years Resolutions nearly so much as you need focus.

Focus means that you've identified the one thing you want MOST to do, and you are spending all your extra time, energy, and money to get it done.

When you have focus, you get things done. When you have focus, you get the important things done.

Are you focused right now? Can you get focused? How long would it take?

I'll bet you could get focused for the entire year in about fifteen minutes, if you wanted to. Really. Just ask yourself what you most wish you'd done last year that you could still do this year.

Then go to it.

3) Creating: Self-Editing Your Novel

There aren't many books on writing that I recommend. I have a page on my web site that recommends about eight books that I've found unusually helpful over the years.

I'll soon be adding another book to that list. Recently, I read a copy of REVISION & SELF-EDITING by James Scott Bell.

I don't particularly love revision. For me, the fun of writing is spewing out the first draft. After that, revision is a necessary evil. Like flossing, only more necessary and more evil.

There are many writers who feel the opposite -- they hate the first draft and love revision.

Different writers are different, and all that matters

is the final product, because that's what the reader sees.

Despite the fact that I really don't like doing revisions, I really enjoyed Jim's book. The reason is because the focus of the book is on what makes good writing. And good writing is good writing whether you do it on the first draft or the twentieth.

Quite simply, REVISION & SELF-EDITING is an Xtremely well-balanced book that tells you everything you need to know to write a very good novel.

Everything that I try to teach my students is in the book. And a few things I didn't know I was trying to teach are in it too.

As it happens, I know James Scott Bell very well, so I emailed him last week to ask for an interview. Jim got back to me in time for this issue of my e-zine.

Here's a short blurb about Jim:

JAMES SCOTT BELL is the bestselling author of Try Dying, Try Darkness, No Legal Grounds, Presumed Guilty, Glimpses of Paradise, Breach of Promise and several other thrillers. He is a winner of the Christy Award for Excellence (Suspense category), and has also been a finalist for the award in the Historical category. He has served as the fiction columnist for Writers Digest magazine and has written two bestselling craft books in the Writers Digest series Write Great Fiction: Plot & Structure and Revision & Self-Editing.

And here's the interview:

Q: Your book has two main parts -- on self-editing and revision. The parts begin respectively with a chapter on your philosophy of self-editing and a chapter on your philosophy of revision. Why is philosophy so important?

A: Because one thing creative writers aren't known for is being systematic about revision and the craft. It's usually just, I'll get in there and write, and then I'll read it over and fix stuff. What I wanted to do was give a simple, strategic approach to the craft of fiction and revision. In this way, I think a lot of writers will save time and their work will be stronger.

Q: Many published writers hire freelance editors to work over their manuscripts before they turn it in to their "real" editors. So why bother to learn editing and revision at all, if we're just going to have somebody else work it over?

A: I suppose it's the same question as to whether you really take wing, or have the mama bird feed you worms

all your life.

Did I just write that?

Anyway, knowing these things yourself makes you a better writer, up front. So what you turn into an editor -- and what you get back -- will only be stronger. Also, if your editor says, "This doesn't work," you'll know WHY it doesn't work, and, much the better, how to fix it.

Q: Is there any one method of revision that's going to work for everyone, or does each writer need to come up with a method tailored for their own needs? If so, how do you do that tailoring?

A: In *Revision & Self-Editing*, I have what I call "The Ultimate Revision Checklist." Any writer can use it to full effect right away. And then, you can tailor it to your own liking. At the very least you will get an understanding of the whole revision process, why the approach works, and what you can do with it.

Q: I've often seen beginning writers get onto a treadmill of reworking the same few opening chapters of their novel over and over again and bringing them back to critique group again and again. Is it better to keep rewriting the same chapters, or should a writer just finish the book, even if it's lousy?

A: I've never been in a critique group, but I have given my drafts to readers. If I were in a group, I wouldn't keep bringing the same thing back. Eventually, you have to finish the novel. Especially if it's your first or second. You learn so much by fighting through to the end.

There's a fine line between too little revision, and too much. In *Revision & Self-Editing*, I advocate revising your previous day's work, then pushing on. Then you cool down, read your manuscript strategically, with few notations, then analyze. You do a second draft, then a polish. Following those steps will help any writer, at any level.

Q: In your book, you say that improving dialogue is the fastest way for a writer to improve his writing. But that's easier said than done. What specific actions can I take to improve my dialogue?

A: Early on in my own writing career, I noticed very little out there that was helpful on the craft of dialogue. So I wanted to come up with a way to teach it that would be practical and instantly usable for writers. I came up with 8 essentials of great dialogue, and 12 tools, and I've been teaching those to novelists, screenwriters and college students for

years.

Here are a couple of nuggets:

* Great dialogue begins before you ever write it. It begins with the orchestration of characters. To the extent your characters are different from each other and have potential for conflict, you're on your way to distinctive dialogue.

* Always think of dialogue as an expression or compression of action. It's never just what we would call "small talk." Characters say things because they want something, or want to avoid something. Their words always aid them in their agendas.

Q: You say in the book you had to learn to be a "happy rewriter." What did you mean by that?

A: I compared the initial phase of writing a novel to falling in love. Everybody's happy. Then, once you're married to the book, the hard part begins. You have to work at the relationship. I never enjoyed that part of the process until, like a lunkhead, I started to see how much better my writing was getting. So too each book. The more you know, the better. A good revision process saves the marriage. I'm happy about that.

Q: What's next for James Scott Bell? Are you working on another book on the craft of writing?

A: I have another book coming out from Writers Digest Books, in November. "The Art of War for Fiction Writers." I wanted to write a "field manual" for those pursuing a career in fiction, along the lines of Sun Tzu's famous treatise, with axioms and commentary. It's intended to give writers lots of little "extras" that will push their manuscripts to that storied "next level" we hear so much about.

Randy sez: Thanks for your comments, Jim! REVISION & SELF-EDITING is a book I'll be referring to many times over the years for my own writing. Here is a link to the Amazon page for this book:

<http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com/blinks/bell/revision.php>

4) Marketing: Web Sites and Blogging, Part 10

This is the tenth in a series of articles on using a web site and/or a blog to help promote your writing.

If you're a writer, the purpose of your web site is to sell you. It sells you all day, every day, and it never gets tired.

One of the best things you can do for yourself as a writer is to help your web site help you. But how do you do that?

One easy way is to figure out what your web site is doing well, and then figure out ways to make it better.

Last month, we looked at Quantcast.com, a web site that helps you understand how many people are coming to your site and gives you some information on what sort of people they are.

This month, we'll continue with a look at another way to measure traffic on your site.

I host my web sites with GoDaddy.com. For \$1.49 per month, GoDaddy provides a service called "Traffic Facts" that shows me quite a bit of information about traffic through my site.

I'm looking at it right now and it tells me that my site is averaging more than 1200 unique visitors per day and just over 6000 page views per day over the last week.

That's a bit more than usual, but I'm not surprised, because this is January. Around the beginning of every year, a lot of people decide that this will be the year they finally write that novel. I expect more traffic in January.

You'll notice that the statistic I quoted above was "Page Views" rather than "Hits."

There's a reason for that. "Hits" don't mean much. "Page Views" actually mean something.

A "Page View" is when somebody browses to a particular page on your web site. (They may or may not read it, but that's another story, and there are ways to find out.) A "Page View" is therefore somewhat meaningful, because the fundamental unit of the web is the page.

What is a "Hit?" That requires a little explanation. Each page on your site typically contains a bunch of text and a number of graphic elements. The text is usually encoded in an "html page" on your web site. It's a file containing only text.

But the graphics aren't stored in that "html file." They're stored in other files, usually with endings like ".jpg" or ".gif" or something else. Your "html file" will contain links to those graphics files.

When your web browser loads the page, it loads the

original "html file" which contains your text, but it also loads all the graphics files. If you have a page with 100 cute little graphics, your web browser will have to ask the web site for each of those 100 graphics files individually.

Every time your web browser requests a file, that's a "Hit."

This is why counting "Hits" doesn't mean very much. If you have loads of graphics on your pages, you'll get loads of "Hits," even if not very many people are actually reading your pages.

I just had a look, and for the past week, I've averaged about 29000 "Hits" per day. This is the first time I've ever checked, because "Hits" don't tell you much.

As I said earlier, "Page Views" tell you something, because each one represents a potential reader for whatever you have to say to the world.

But what if people aren't reading your stuff? What if they come to your site and then bounce away without reading it? How would you know?

The answer is to look at how much time people spend reading your pages. Traffic Facts gives me this kind of information too.

I'm looking at its report right now and I see that last week, my most popular page was my "Snowflake" article, which had over 7000 page views. That's just over 1000 people per day. The average time spent on this page was 1 minute and 35 seconds.

That might not seem like much, but it's actually a fairly long time. Try holding your breath for that long and you'll think it's forever!

In the fast-paced world of the web, people don't stay on any one page very long. I once analyzed a web site where the average time per page was only a few seconds. Not a very effective site!

If you've got readers averaging a minute or more per page on your site, you can be certain they're actually reading something. (There'll always be some people who bounce away in seconds, so the reality is that if the average is 1 minute, then a fair number of your readers are taking 2 or 3 minutes to read your page.)

I check my Traffic Facts about once per week. Why? Because it gives me insights into what people like about my site. And if I know what's working, I can do more of it. If I know what's not working, I can do less of it, or else find a way to do it better.

As an example, years ago, I began noticing that my most popular page was my article on how to design a novel --

my "Snowflake" page.

Honestly, I hadn't thought much about that article when I first wrote it. People had been emailing me a lot to ask about my Snowflake method, and I was wearing out my fingers typing in the same stuff every time.

So I posted an article on my web site with all the basics. That way I could defer all questions to my site.

When I noticed that the Snowflake page was getting more views than the pages about my books, I realized that more articles on "how to write fiction" were in order.

Eventually, I moved all those articles to a whole new domain, and AdvancedFictionWriting.com was born, along with this e-zine.

All that from looking at my traffic patterns.

I continue to track page views of the Snowflake page. Last year it had a record number of views, over 274,000. In six years, the page has had over 750,000 views!

Do you have a traffic measuring service with your web site? Most web hosting services give you at least some rudimentary traffic data.

Have you looked at it?

If not, now is a good time to do so. Take a look and try to get answers to the following questions:

- * How many people visit your site per day?
- * How many page views does your site get per day?
- * What are your 3 most popular pages?
- * How long do visitors stay on each of these 3 pages?

Are you surprised by the answers? What do they tell you about your site? What are site visitors most interested in?

All of the above are good questions, but the most important one is this one: What actions do the answers to the above questions suggest?

Knowledge is power. When you know what works, you can do more of it. When you know what doesn't work, you can do less of it.

I've had a web site for just about 10 years now. In the early days, I saw about 15 page views per day.

That was good -- it was a whole lot easier than me having 15 conversations with potential readers every day.

But I've looked at my traffic data from the get-go, and I've continued to take actions based on what I saw.

That's why my traffic didn't stay at 15 page views per day.

There is much more to say about all this, but I think it's time for me to quit talking so you can start doing.

Look at your traffic reports today. Ignore the thousands of details that you could look at and just go for the big picture.

Answer the four main questions I listed above. Figure out a few actions you could take to make your site better. Pick one. Then take action.

Nothing happens unless you take action.

5) What's New At AdvancedFictionWriting.com

I recently posted my seventh monthly humor column in a new online magazine. The latest column is titled, "Gorilla Marketing" and it's about obnoxious marketing tactics. Here's the link:

http://www.ChristianFictionOnlineMagazine.com/biz_rooney.html

I teach at roughly 4 to 6 writing conferences per year, depending on my schedule. Here's what's coming in 2009:

I will be teaching internet marketing in a major track at the Florida Christian Writers conference in February. Details here:
<http://www.flwriters.org/>

I will be doing an 8-hour fiction mentoring workshop at the Mount Hermon Christian Writers Conference in April. Details here:
<http://www.mounthermon.org/adult/professionals/writers-conference>

If you'd like me to teach at your conference, email me to find out how outrageously expensive I am.

If you'd just like to hear me teach, I have a number of recordings and e-books that are outrageously cheap. Details here:
<http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com/info>

6) Steal This E-zine!

This E-zine is free, and I personally guarantee it's worth at least 384 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, 2009.

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 is one place to subscribe: 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 2-paragraph blurb with it:

Award-winning novelist Randy Ingermanson, "the Snowflake Guy," publishes the Advanced Fiction Writing E-zine, with more than 14,000 readers, every month. If you want to learn the craft and marketing of fiction, AND make your writing more valuable to editors, AND have FUN doing it, visit <http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com>.

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

Randy Ingermanson
Publisher, Advanced Fiction Writing E-zine
