
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 (more than 600 of you signed up in April), 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.

Ever thought about coauthoring your novel with someone else? Do you know when it makes sense to do so -- and when you should run like fire? Check out my article on "Coauthoring Without Murder."

At some point in your novel, you need to describe people, places, and things. Do you know what essential magic component your description must ALWAYS have? Find out in "The Dark Art of Description."

Do you need endorsements for your novel? Do they do any good? And how do you get an endorsement if you don't know anybody? Find out in "Want Fries With That Endorsement?"

Are you reading my blog? Join the fun here:
<http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com/blog>

2) Organizing: Coauthoring Without Murder

"We're Best Friends Forever," she said, tilting her head toward the woman sitting beside her at the dinner table. "And we're writing a novel together. Isn't that COOL?"

I nodded noncommittally. "Sounds . . . great." We were eating supper at a writing conference and I was hosting a table and trying to get to know the other writers at my table. But anytime I hear that two friends are coauthoring, I get nervous, because writing a novel together can be murder on your friendship.

"We heard you coauthored a couple of novels with your best friend," one of the BFFs said. "And those worked out great, right?"

I nodded. Yes, I wrote two novels with my best buddy, John Olson. Yes, we sold the novels, won several awards, and remained best buddies. Yes, it worked out extremely well. Yes, we would do it again.

But the fact is that writing a novel with a friend doesn't always work out great. In fact, it rarely works out at all.

Coauthoring is serious business, and there are a lot of ways to go wrong. John and I were too ignorant to know better, or maybe we wouldn't have tried it. But we did and it worked.

The main reason -- probably the ONLY reason -- you should ever coauthor a novel with anyone is that you each bring some skill to the table that the other person doesn't have.

With fiction, the most common reason two people coauthor a novel is that one of them is an expert on the subject of the novel, while the other is an expert at writing fiction.

The reason this works so well is that fiction needs both good content and good craft in order to work. Normally, an author brings both the content and the craft, but it makes perfect sense to team up one person who has the content and another person who has the craft.

For example, the LEFT BEHIND series, which sold tens of millions of books, teamed up Tim LaHaye (famous in certain circles for his interpretation of biblical prophecy) with Jerry Jenkins (a talented novelist). Tim brought the content; Jerry brought the craft. Together, they made an enormously successful team.

So whenever I meet BFFs who are working together on a novel, the first question I ask is, "What does each of you bring to the project that the other doesn't?"

A lot of times, this draws a very long, blank look, and the words, "Well . . . we're FRIENDS."

My next question is, "How do you split up the writing?"

If this also gets a blank look, then I know this partnership is in trouble. You have to split up the writing somehow. You have to. You can't sit there at the keyboard all cuddly and both type at once. (John and I NEVER tried this, but I'm pretty sure it doesn't work.)

I've often thought about what went right with John and me. There were several reasons that we made a good team.

First, we have complementary organizational skills. John is a visionary guy who is great at setting strategic goals. I am good at taking a vision and translating that into a set of tactical goals. So our first novel, OXYGEN, was John's idea (although I contributed a lot of ideas). I made the battle plans (and John played a key role in revising those plans).

Second, we have different areas of expertise. John is a biochemist. I'm a physicist. Our novel, about the first

human mission to Mars, required a ton of research. John handled the life-science aspects. I took on the physical-science stuff.

Third, we have different skills as fiction designers. John is exceptional at developing plot and he LOVES writing synopses. I find character development easy and I LOVE writing character sketches. So we each did what we liked best in developing the story and writing the proposal.

Fourth, we have complementary emphases in our writing. John loves to "write from the shadows" -- giving each scene an air of mystery and intrigue. I like shining a bright light on things, so that the reader always knows exactly what the viewpoint character knows.

So when John edited my scenes, he added some mystery and shadows. When I edited his scenes, I clarified things that might have confused the reader. Somehow, it all melded together into a unique style that was neither mine nor John's. Our editors were completely unable to guess which of us wrote which parts.

Now here is where things could have gone badly wrong. If we'd asked anyone for advice, they'd have told us not to both be the writer. It's very hard to mix two people's styles into something that works.

But we didn't ask for advice because we didn't know there might be a problem. So both of us wrote first draft material and both of us edited. Our biggest problem was scheduling things so that we were always up to speed on what the other guy had written.

Early on, we thought that if we each wrote a scene at the same time, then we could work twice as fast. But then we discovered that the scenes simply didn't work, because the tone of one scene's ending determines the tone of the scene that follows. And you don't know exactly how a scene is going to play out until you write it.

So eventually, we hit on a plan where we'd map out the scenes for a week in advance. It would go like this: Randy will write a scene Monday morning and send it to John. John will edit that Monday night, then write the next scene, and send them both to Randy. On Tuesday morning, Randy accepts or rejects John's changes, then edits John's scene, then writes the next scene, and sends it all to John.

Repeat until the end of the book. It's a little complicated, but it worked without anybody losing an eye.

There was another rule we had. Each of us "owned" certain characters and we got to write the first draft of any scenes in which our character was the point-of-view character. John "owned" the female

biochemist astronaut named Valkerie. I "owned" the male physicist astronaut Bob.

There was a third character named Nate who had a fair number of viewpoint scenes. Nate was a very rude and belligerent guy, and it turned out that I'm ruder and more belligerent than John, so I wound up writing Nate's scenes. This evened the work out, because John's character Valkerie had more scenes than my character Bob.

If you are going to work with another author, then one key requirement is that you both have to leave your ego at the door. This is hard. Writers have big egos (otherwise, they'd never do something as egotistical as believe that they might be able to write something that many thousands of people might actually want to read.)

I think what made things work for John and me was that we each had a very healthy respect for the other guy's talents. We had been friends for a few years, and each of us knew what the other was capable of doing. I think each of us felt lucky to be working with the other guy.

There is a very bad reason that people sometimes give for coauthoring: "It cuts the work in half to have two people working on it."

No. It cuts the MONEY in half. But there is always some inefficiency in getting two people working together. I suspect that in most cases there is a LOT of inefficiency.

Don't kid yourself on this. It may take more time to coauthor a novel than to write it alone. I used to joke that "John wrote 80% of our book . . . and I wrote the other 80%."

But I suspect that each of us actually put in about 120% of the normal effort for a book. This would be foolish unless the end result is better than either author could have done alone. In our case, I think we did get a better result as a team than either of us could have done solo.

When John and I first pitched the idea for our book to an editor, one question he asked was what we'd do if we disagreed. We hadn't thought about that, but the answer seemed obvious to me. The book was John's idea. So if we couldn't agree, then he had the deciding vote. For the same reason, his name would go first on the cover. And if we decided to break up the team, then John would own full rights to the book.

Our editor thought that made sense. It would have been wise to spell that out in writing, along with a few other details. Maybe we should have. I've heard that it's a good idea to write a contract between coauthors, but we never did.

Should you write your novel with a coauthor? Before you do, here are some questions you MUST have answers to:

- * Why can this NOT be a solo project?
- * How are you going to split the work?
- * How are you going to split the money?
- * When you disagree, who gets to decide?
- * Whose name will go first on the cover, and why?

You'll notice that none of those questions has anything to do with whether you're best friends with your coauthor. Friendship is a fine, fine thing, but you need a good sound business reason before you enter a business relationship with anyone.

I never heard what happened to the two BFFs who were writing a novel together. Maybe they finished it. Most likely they didn't. I hope they're still friends.

People ask me once in a while if John and I are going to write another novel together. The answer is always a good, firm, "Maybe." We'd like to. Working together was great fun, and I learned a lot about writing from John. I hope that he may have learned a trick or two from me.

But it has to be the right book, at the right time, for the right reason. When that happens, we'll do it. If it doesn't, we won't. I value John's friendship more than I value any book we might write together.

3) Creating: The Dark Art of Description

One of my loyal e-zine readers recently asked me to write an article on description. That prompted me to ask myself why I've never written one. In all the years I've been teaching fiction, I've said almost nothing on how to write description.

The reason is simple. I generally don't like reading description. Description is usually boring. Description is static. If a picture really is worth a thousand words (I suspect it's worth much more), then it takes at least a thousand words to show the reader one picture.

I'd much rather spend those thousand words getting my character in trouble or getting him out.

This is the one advantage that the movies have over a novel -- a movie can show a lot of visual imagery very quickly. In a novel, the only visual objects you've got are the 26 letters of the alphabet.

Still, every once in a while, you've got to describe a

person, a place, or a thing. How do you do that? How do you know if it's working?

There are a billion ways to do a description. You'll know it's working if it advances the story. And what does it mean to advance the story?

Let's remember what the purpose of fiction is. Fiction is about giving your reader an emotional experience. If you've been reading my e-zine long, you know that I am always harping on the importance of creating a "Powerful Emotional Experience.

If you do that well, then you can do a lot of other things badly and your reader will still love your writing. If you do it badly, then you can do a lot of other things well and your reader will still be yawning.

I want my reader to like me, so here's my rule for writing description:

Description should help to create a "Powerful Emotional Experience" for the reader.

If your description does that, then keep it. If not, then slit its vile throat, because it's sucking the life-blood out of your novel.

Let's look at an example of a description that works nicely. This is taken from NO SECOND CHANCE, by Harlan Coben.

Our character, Dr. Marc Seidman, was shot by an unknown assailant in the first sentence of the novel. Marc lost consciousness almost right away, and is now easing back to reality in the ICU. One of the first things he becomes aware of is a nurse. Here's how Coben describes the nurse:

"I looked up and saw a nurse. The perspective, so different from the one I was used to, threw me. Nothing felt right. I was supposed to be the one standing looking down, not the other way around. A white hat -- one of those small, harshly triangular numbers -- sat like a bird's nest on the nurse's head. I've spent a great deal of my life working in a wide variety of hospitals, but I'm not sure I've ever seen a hat like that outside of TV or the movies. The nurse was heavysset and black."

Randy sez: When Dr. Seidman comes to, he's disoriented and unable to move. The description of the nurse contributes to a strong sense of helplessness and disorientation by focusing on that horrible, fantasmic, institutional hat. This conjures up in my mind Nurse Ratched from ONE FLEW OVER THE CUCKOO'S NEST.

We'll learn later that the nurse isn't so bad. She's

actually on Dr. Seidman's side. But that's for later. Fiction is about what's happening right now, and right now, Dr. Seidman feels disoriented and helpless and he hates it.

You'll notice that the vast bulk of the description focuses on that harshly triangular hat. Only at the end do we get the peripheral details about the nurse ("heavysset and black") which contribute nothing to the emotive force of the scene.

As the scene progresses, Marc will learn from a detective that his wife is dead. He'll pick up a strong sense that he himself may be a suspect in the murder. And he'll learn that his infant daughter is gone. Missing. Presumably kidnapped. He'll learn that he's been unconscious for twelve days.

It all adds up to a crushing sense of despair and hopelessness. The description of the nurse is just one of many pieces that all work together to create a powerful feeling that Marc Seidman has found himself in an impossible situation. It's an electric start to a lightning-paced book.

Our next example comes from a tense action scene in James Swain's novel MIDNIGHT RAMBLER. Our hero is Jack Carpenter, a Miami ex-cop with a special talent for finding missing kids. The Miami police have hired him to help track down a newborn baby kidnapped straight out of the hospital.

Jack has quickly tracked the kidnapper to a rat-trap of a house in Coconut Grove. While the police knock on the front door, Jack investigates the back yard and discovers that the baby has been stuffed in a garbage pail. He grabs the kid and then hears shots fired in the house. He turns to see the kidnapper, Jorge Castillo, coming out with a large Colt Peacemaker pistol. Note Swain's description of Castillo in the fifth paragraph of this taut action scene:

Castillo faced me. He pointed at the baby as if I was supposed to understand.

"No," I said firmly.

He aimed the Peacemaker's smoking barrel at my head.

"No," I repeated.

Our eyes locked. It was the first good look I'd gotten of him. Fleishy jowls, skin savaged by acne, a flattened nose. A face only a mother could love. Or not.

"Give me the baby," he demanded in broken English.

"How much did they pay you for her?" I asked.

Castillo aimed at my left ear. I didn't want to lose it, or go deaf, but I wasn't giving this soulless bastard this child. Not now, not ever.

"Ten grand? Fifteen?" I asked.

Castillo lined up his shot. "Last chance."

Randy sez: Normally, it's a bad idea to break up a tightly wound action scene with description. But Swain makes it work here. How? By describing just enough of Castillo to make it clear that this ugly-as-sin guy is Evil Incarnate.

Note that every action scene has peaks and valleys. Swain works in this description in a natural valley, using it to give the reader a slight breather before he ramps up the intensity in the next few paragraphs.

As a final example, lets look at a description taken from *DIES THE FIRE*, by S.M. Stirling. This is an apocalyptic alternate history novel set in 1998 in which the earth's physics is adjusted by some unknown entity so as to prevent electricity and explosives from working. In a civilization without technology, only the clever and strong survive.

The protagonist is Mike Havel, a small-plane pilot. An hour before the earth's physics is changed, Mike is picking up a wealthy family to fly to their ranch in Montana. It's a strange family, and the strangest of the five is the youngest daughter, Astrid, 14. Here's how Stirling describes her on page 3 of the book:

The kid was unusual as well, all huge silver-blue eyes and long white-blond hair, dressed in some sort of medieval-looking suede leather outfit, her nose in a book -- an illustrated Tolkien with a tooled-leather cover. She had an honest-to-God bow in a case leaning against her chair, and a quiver of arrows.

She kept her face turned to the print, ignoring him. He'd been raised to consider that sort of behavior rude, but then, she was probably used to ignoring the chauffeur, and his family hadn't had many employees.

Randy sez: Stirling is playing some rather fun mind games with the reader here. The reader knows from the back cover of the book that this is a novel in which civilization is forced back into a pre-technology era. And here on page 3 of the novel is a kid who can only be described as a weird elf-wannabe. (And furthermore, nobody on this earth has silver-blue eyes, which makes you wonder if Astrid has a little Arwen in her.)

Under normal circumstances, you'd think Astrid is a rich and spacy brat. But this isn't a normal book, and you know good and well that her bow and arrows are going to be darned useful -- if she can get rid of her attitude.

So the feeling you're supposed to feel toward Astrid here is a strange mix of curiosity about her elvishness and irritation with her brattiness and anticipation that she may just turn out to be a useful kid. In my view, it works.

You may be wondering . . . can Astrid shoot? Yeah, she can shoot. Oh, Lordy, can she shoot. Which is good, because by page 10, Mike has crash-landed his plane with the family deep in the Idaho wilderness, and in his pack is a gun that will never shoot again.

By the time Mike figures all this out, Brat Astrid's bow and arrow are looking pretty good.

You can settle for boring descriptions of your characters that don't move your story because they don't move your reader. Or you can look for a way to make description do double duty -- showing a static image AND setting the reader up for a Powerful Emotional Experience.

4) Marketing: Want Fries With That Endorsement?

One question I hear often from writers trying to break in to the publishing world is this: "How do I get a published novelist to endorse my work?"

That is a tough, tough question. Here's why.

Being a working novelist is hard work -- usually long hours at low pay, often wedged in to the few hours not consumed by a day job and family responsibilities. Reading a book for endorsement takes quite a bit of time, usually several hours. And it's completely unethical to accept money to endorse a novel.

So when you ask a novelist for an endorsement, you're asking for a gift of time, without being able to compensate for that time with money. That's a big, big favor to ask someone you don't know. It's a fairly big favor to ask someone you DO know.

Every published author I knows struggles with how to handle the flood of endorsement requests. Some authors never write endorsements. Others set a fixed quota -- so many per year, and then no more. Others do as many

as time permits, and then just say no to the rest. A few seem to write endorsements faster than McDonalds flips out Big Macs.

One question we all ought to be asking is whether endorsements actually work. Think about these questions for a second:

* Have you EVER bought a book solely because of an endorsement?

* Have you EVER bought a book partly due to an endorsement?

* Have you ever NOT bought a book because it had no endorsements?

I did once buy a book for no other reason than the endorsement on the cover was over-the-top breathless about the book. I've never done that again, because I didn't think that book lived up to the hype.

I have occasionally opened a book when I saw an endorsement on the cover that gave me reason to think the book might be good. But if the book didn't interest me on its own merits, it went back on the shelf.

I can't remember ever deciding not to buy a book because of a lack of endorsements.

So in my mind, it's not obvious that endorsements are all that useful. But all the same, I don't think an endorsement can hurt (unless it were written by Jack the Ripper) so I usually do try to get endorsements for my books.

There is a right and a wrong way to go about that. The usual way I do it is to send e-mails to a group of writer friends, describing my book and ending with, "If you're interested in reading this for possible endorsement, then send me an email and I'll pass your name along to my marketing director."

This is a low pressure way to do things, because they all know that I'm e-mailing a bunch of them, and so if they don't have the time or desire to read my book, all they have to do is do nothing.

Most of the writers in this group do the same when they have a book coming out, so this behavior is not only expected, it's encouraged. It's a way for each of us to get free copies of books we probably would have read anyway.

That method works great for getting endorsements from your friends. But what about from people you don't know?

I generally hate asking someone I don't know for an endorsement. It takes a LOT of time to read a book, and so asking for an endorsement is asking for a favor. I'd

rather ask favors from my friends than from strangers.

Time is the main reason I almost always say no when I get an e-mail from someone I don't know asking me to read their book for endorsement. If I said yes to all of these requests, I'd end up spending every waking moment reading books for endorsement.

This is doubly true when I get a request from someone who has not yet sold their novel, but wants my endorsement so as to make a good impression on the publisher.

I don't know of any novelist who would say yes to this kind of a request, because it's completely unnecessary. Publishers already HAVE employees to read manuscripts by unpublished writers and decide whether they're worth publishing. They don't need authors to do that task too.

It's hard, grueling work to sort through the many unsuitable manuscripts to find the rare gem. But a publisher's employees do it because they're paid to.

An author, however, is not paid to do that. Authors simply can't afford to do hard, grueling work for no pay. Neither can you. (If you can, then there's a ditch in my back yard just screaming for you to come dig it.)

What if you don't know anybody? Is it hopeless for you to try to get endorsements?

No, there are still ways. The key thing is that you need to EARN the right to ask someone to read your manuscript for possible endorsement. You do that by first writing something that's truly excellent and then building relationships with possible endorsers.

Let's assume you've got a manuscript that's excellent. You want to get an endorsement, but you don't know anybody whose endorsement you'd want. How do you establish a relationship with a writer without being horribly, sickeningly, weaselishly tacky? Here are a couple of suggestions that illustrate the basic principles.

Idea #1: Go to a writing conference and get your work critiqued by a published novelist. This is not as hard as it sounds. Plenty of novelists teach at writing conferences, and often part of their duty is to critique manuscripts. (Yes, they are paid to do this.)

I love conferences, so I do this all the time. On the rare occasion when I find something I really like, I'll offer to read it for endorsement. I don't do this often, because I don't often find something that's really excellent.

My one rule here is that the endorsement has to be my

idea. If someone asks me to endorse it, then that puts pressure on me that I don't want, so my answer is no.

A lot of novelists feel the same way I do, although some of them are more hard-nosed than I am. I don't know anyone who is significantly softer-nosed than me.

You may be thinking that this sounds like a long-shot. Yes, of course, if your manuscript isn't ready yet, then this is a long, long, long-shot. But if your manuscript is terrific, then this is actually a pretty easy shot.

Idea #2: I got this idea from my friend, best-selling novelist Brandilyn Collins, who got a couple of stellar endorsements for her very first book when she was completely unknown. I have Brandilyn's permission to share this with you.

Brandilyn sez:

My first book was A QUESTION OF INNOCENCE, a true crime. I was learning to write fiction at the time. I'd learned a LOT about the craft from reading novels by an NYT bestselling novelist -- a criminal-lawyer-turned-writer of legal suspense. I really respected this guy and vowed to get his endorsement. I sent him a request. The letter was targeted to him and mentioned his books that I'd read.

This author had a signing scheduled in San Francisco. His 6th novel had just been pubbed. I'd already read 4 & 5. I read, dissected 1-3. At the signing the author heard the ubiquitous "Where do you get your ideas?" kinds of questions. I had mine formulated and memorized. I asked him to speak to the evolution of his author's voice (which had changed dramatically). Then I named every novel he'd written in order, describing his voice in each book. By the time I got to book 6, his mouth was open. "Wow," he said. "If I had to describe the change in my author voice over time it would be just like that!"

How could he not agree to read my book? I GOT him. I clearly understood the craft of writing. And I'd taken the time to study all of his works. His name and endorsement ended up on my book's front cover:

"Captures the twists and turns, legal and psychological, of one of California's most compelling recent murder cases in a lively and arresting style."

Randy sez: What Brandilyn did was to take the time to study the work of a particular author and then build a crash relationship with him at a book-signing. This was smart. She stood out from the crowd like a Great Dane in a pack of poodles.

As my way of thanking Brandilyn for that idea, let me

refer you to her web site and blog:
<http://www.BrandilynCollins.com>
<http://www.ForensicsAndFaith.blogspot.com>

Brandilyn writes suspense (the kind with lots of dead people) and she knows quite a bit about the CSI type of criminal forensics. If you're squeamish, then her Web site may make you squeam, but if you're not, it won't.

Getting an endorsement is a ticklish process, no doubt about it. If you want to get them for your book, first try to imagine you're a working novelist trying to drill out your quota of words every day to earn your loaf. How would you want to be treated by an endorsement-seeker?

I'll just bet you'd want to be treated with respect. I'll bet you'd be annoyed by anyone with an entitlement mentality demanding that you read their work. I'll bet you'd give preference to the writers who took the time to build a relationship with you.

Treat those pesky working novelists that way, and see what happens.

5) What's New At AdvancedFictionWriting.com

In April, I signed a contract with the publisher of the popular "Dummies" guides for a book titled WRITING FICTION FOR DUMMIES. This will, I hope, be an essential guide for pre-published novelists, and a useful reference for published authors. Stay tuned for more information on this book.

I recently posted the latest installment in my monthly humor column. This month's title is "Those Pesky Endorsements," in which my plumber Sam helps me deal with an over-zealous endorsement-seeker. Can you guess how Sam made creative use of a broken garbage disposal? 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.

I'll be teaching two workshops at the Oregon Christian Writer's Conference at the end of July. Details here:
<http://www.oregonchristianwriters.org>

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 747 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 16,000 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
