
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 (over 600 of you signed up in May), 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.

All of us wish we could get more stuff done. Want to know a powerful tool for helping you get the important stuff done? Check out my article on "Accountability and You."

The fundamental unit of fiction is the scene. But how does that tie into chapters? How do you put scenes together to make chapters? Or does it matter? Find out in my article on "Scenes and Chapters."

Ever notice that everybody wants to be heard but nobody wants to listen? Want to know what your main task is in marketing your work? Read my article, "Earning the Right to be Read."

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

2) Organizing: Accountability and You

One of the smartest pieces of advice I ever got came from my friend Tosca Lee. Tosca is a novelist who works for the Gallup organization helping business people learn to work more effectively.

We were at a conference last fall chatting about how to get more stuff done, and Tosca told me, "You need a personal Board of Directors -- someone to help you set goals and deadlines and enforce them."

I thought that was a pretty good piece of advice, so naturally I did nothing about it. Until recently, anyway.

I now have a Board of Directors, and we recently made some goals for me. One of those goals is to wrap up a project I've been working on for almost a year. It's a very worthwhile project, probably the best thing I could do for myself right now.

But I've been putting off working on it because other things were crowding it out. Important stuff. Writing. Work. Family. The usual suspects.

So my Board had to get harsh with me. The conversation

went very roughly like this:

Board: Project X is important to you, right?

Me: Right.

Board: How long would it take to get it done if you worked hard at it, without killing yourself?

Me: Basically, there are three major milestones. I could get the first one done 2 weeks from today if I really had to. I could get the second one done 4 weeks later without too much problem. I could finish the project about 10 days after that.

Board: Great. Those are your next three milestones then. What penalty are you willing to pay if you miss them?

Me: Penalty? Um, fifty bucks?

Board: Will a penalty of fifty dollars be so harsh that you can guarantee you won't have to pay us?

Me: Not really. If I got side-tracked, I'd probably pay the fine and not worry about it.

Board: That's not a good penalty. How high would your fine have to be that you can be very sure you won't have to pay it?

Me (laughing nervously): Well, if it was five hundred dollars for each milestone, I'd do whatever it took to get it done. Because I can't afford to pay fifteen hundred bucks just to miss a deadline.

Board: Are you SURE you could get it done in that time?

Me: Yeah, I could do it. I'd have to buckle down, but I could get it done.

Board: Are you willing to commit to a fine of five hundred dollars for each milestone? Is the reward of finishing this project worth running that risk?

Me: Absolutely.

Board: We want to hear the commitment.

Me (taking deep breath): If I don't reach any of those milestones, I'll pay you five hundred dollars for each miss. Gack! What did I just say?

Board: Do you want to back out? Last chance!

Me: No, I'm in. I'm committed.

When I got off the phone with my Board, I was already rearranging my schedule in my mind. I'm a good tactical

thinker, and so I made a list of steps to complete the first milestone.

The next working day, I sat down and put in two and a half solid hours of work on that milestone. And I hit it! Yes, really, that's all it took was a few hours on one day of work to hit the first milestone. That's the power of fear.

I'm working on the next milestone now. This one's a bit harder, but I have more time to work on it. I'm confident I'm going to hit it too. Ditto the third one.

That's what accountability is. Let's look at the crucial elements that are making this work for me and that can make it work for you:

- * An accountability partner. You need someone to answer to. You have to give that person or group authority. They have to be willing to exercise it. If they aren't willing to enforce your commitments, then they are worthless to you. Find somebody with a spine.

- * A worthwhile goal. If the goal isn't worthwhile, then there's no real reason for you to waste time on it. So pick a goal that you really want to reach.

- * Objective milestones. Make sure you choose milestones that there ain't no arguing about. "Being loved by the masses" is a fine goal, but how would you verify it? "Blogging every day this week" is something that anyone can verify just by checking your blog.

- * Achievable milestones. You need milestones that are wholly in your control and that you can reasonably accomplish. "Getting an agent" is outside your control because those pesky agents might not cooperate. "Sending out queries to ten agents by the end of the month" is completely in your control and completely doable.

- * A reasonable schedule. You need a schedule that will stretch you without killing you. Neither too easy nor too hard. It makes sense to set these with fairly short time horizons, like a few days or a few weeks. It's easier to estimate what you can do in an hour than in a year.

- * A penalty stiff enough to get your attention. If you can just barely afford to pay the fine for failure, then that's ideal.

What about you? Do you have a worthwhile goal that you've been working on sorta, kinda, maybe, whenever you have time? Maybe you want to finish your novel. Maybe you want to write your proposal. Maybe you want to just finish the stinkin' first chapter. Whatever.

If you've been putting off reaching this goal and you

know you could hit it if only you weren't so darned busy, then here are some steps to work through to get it done:

- * Pick a worthwhile goal and write it down. Explain in writing what rewards you'll get for reaching this goal. The rewards may be money, prestige, personal satisfaction, or whatever makes your clock tick.

- * Break your goal down into one or more milestones that are each objective and achievable. Assign dates that are reasonable if you work hard.

- * Find an accountability partner and talk over your goal and milestones together. Talk about why the goal is worthwhile. Explain why each milestone is critical to reaching the goal. Describe roughly what level of effort you need to reach each milestone. Convince your accountability partner that you can reach each milestone by its deadline.

- * Commit to a penalty you'll pay for missing each milestone. Have your accountability partner commit to enforcing the agreement.

- * Go to it. You are now committed. Other people will try to encroach on your time. Tough. Explain to them that you have a commitment to hit a worthwhile deadline, but that it carries a heavy penalty for failure. They'll understand. They won't like it, but they'll understand. They'll also be watching to see if you fly -- or crash and burn. They may even be envious.

That's really all there is to accountability. I'd like to thank Tosca Lee and John Olson for helping me get more accountable. Tosca's latest book is titled HAVAH. John's latest is titled SHADE. Five-letter titles are apparently cool.

Tosca is at <http://www.ToscaLee.com>

John is at <http://www.Litany.com>

3) Creating: Scenes and Chapters

Correction: In last month's column, I referred to a novel and made two inexcusable errors: I forgot to name the author and I got the title wrong! The correct title is DIES THE FIRE and the author is S.M. Stirling. The novel, to remind you, is an alternative history which begins with a minor change in the laws of physics on March 17, 1998. After the "Change," electricity doesn't work and explosive chemicals such as gunpowder don't explode. I'm now three books into the series and am

finding it fascinating.

On to this month's column:

One of the most common questions I get in my e-mail is how to put scenes together into chapters. This usually comes after somebody reads my article "Writing the Perfect Scene" on my web site. (You can find it by Googling the title.)

In that article, I talk about the two kinds of scenes, which Dwight Swain calls "Scenes" and "Sequels." The first of these, "Scenes," are proactive. The lead character in the Scene has a goal, works through a series of conflicts, and eventually crashes into a setback. That then sets up a "Sequel," which is reactive. The lead character reacts to the setback in the previous Scene, works through a dilemma, and eventually comes to a decision. The decision then serves as the goal for the next Scene.

All of this is pretty simple, but most novels are organized in numbered chapters, each containing one or more scenes. How does the author decide how to combine scenes into chapters?

There are no rules on this question. You're free to do whatever makes you happy.

Here's what makes me happy. You may find it useful or you may not, but it'll give you some idea of how lax you can be on this particular question:

I like my chapters to be fairly short -- ten to twelve pages. My scenes tend to vary anywhere from one to ten pages. Occasionally, a very short scene may be less than one page. A very long scene might go more than ten pages. My average scene is about four pages.

So when I'm creating chapters, I just put in a chapter break every ten to twelve pages. I give the chapter as many scenes as will fit into that length. If there's a particular cliff-hanger that ends a Scene, then I'll consider breaking the chapter there, even if it gives me a short chapter. Likewise, if there's a specially momentous decision that ends a Sequel, then I'm likely to end the chapter there.

Chapter separation is one of the few decisions that your editor will leave completely up to you (unless you do something weird, like making every sentence its own chapter.) I've never heard of an editor rechaptering an author's work. I suppose it happens, but no editor has ever done that to me, and none of my author friends have complained about it.

So feel free to build your chapters the way you like them. It's one of the very few decisions in fiction writing that is totally up to you. (If you've ever had

your "perfect title" changed by a marketing committee, you'll know that a lot of decisions aren't yours to make.)

On a related note, people often e-mail me to ask how to combine those pesky Scenes and Sequels in books with multiple point-of-view characters.

The answer to that is that most modern fiction has multiple POV characters, and most modern fiction tends to favor the Scene over the Sequel. So a common strategy is to write a Scene from one character's POV and then switch to another Scene from a second character's POV. Later on, you may switch back to the first character and write a new Scene -- without ever showing us the Sequel that followed.

Is this legitimate?

Yes, if it works. Usually it works. Most times, you can find some way to work in the Sequel material (reaction, dilemma, and decision) for one character in the Scene having a different POV character. If you can do this, then do so! It makes a lot of sense and it speeds up the story.

The bottom line is this: Each scene in your novel (whether it's a "Scene" or a "Sequel") is it's own self-contained little story. Each scene must have a beginning, a middle, and an end. Each scene must give the reader a powerful emotional experience.

If your scenes do all that, then you have a lot of freedom to put them together however you like to build your novel. You can combine them in different ways, just like you can put together Lego pieces in different ways.

4) Marketing: Earning the Right to be Read

Marketing for writers amounts to getting more people to read your work tomorrow than are reading it today.

Marketing is hard, whether you have only one reader (your critique buddy) or whether you're a multi-million selling author.

Marketing is hard, for the simple reason that all of those people you want to read your stuff are busy. They did just fine today without knowing you exist. Even if they learn you exist tomorrow, why should they give some of their limited time to you?

Nobody will give you their time for nothing, other than a few of your friends and relatives. If you want anyone else's time, you have to earn it.

That's a hard, hard truth, but it bears repeating: You have to earn the right to be read.

I do. You do. We all have to earn our readers. And none of us likes it, because earning anything takes time. We want it to happen instantly.

We start writing and we want to have a contract in a year. We launch a blog and we want millions of readers to be on our RSS feed in a month. We join FaceBook and we want thousands of Friends overnight.

Let me blunt here. None of those things happen. Instant success is a lie.

People make a big deal about the overnight sensation of Susan Boyle. But think about dear Sue for a minute. She got famous at the age of 47, but the woman has been singing practically ALL HER LIFE.

Susan Boyle earned the right to be heard. When she got her chance, she made the most of it. But for decades before she got that chance, she was earning the right to have that chance.

Writing is a lot like that. When you sit down to write a novel, you are entering into a competition with hundreds of thousands of other people who also want to write fiction.

Nobody can possibly read the work of all those hundreds of thousands of writers. You can't. I can't. The editors can't. Every one of us would collapse under the workload of trying to read them all.

And yet, out of those hundreds of thousands of hopeful writers, some of them are going to become immensely successful and will be read by millions. Why?

Let's work backwards here. Those writers who are read by millions today were (not so long ago) being read by tens of thousands, just like most other published writers. But they did something special. They weren't satisfied to write "well enough." They learned to deliver fiction that was better in some way than the other books that were selling a few tens of thousands of copies. They EARNED the right to be read by millions by first delighting a much smaller audience.

The best thing you can do to market your work is to improve your level of craft.

Let's remember that even authors who are selling ten thousand copies of their books have done something pretty spectacular. Sales like that are in the top one percent of all published books (counting all titles,

including small-press books, self-published books, and print-on-demand books).

So if your novel is selling 10k copies, you're actually in a pretty elite club. How did you get there? By luck? No, by working hard for years to develop your skills to be picked up by a publisher that could move 10k copies of your book. You EARNED the right to be published by a royalty-paying publisher by developing excellence in your writing craft.

Let's step back again. Every published author ever born began life the same way -- as an unpublished, no-name, wannabe writer. But they sold their book and got published. How? By doing things intelligently. They studied the craft of writing. They took writing courses and bought books on writing. They worked hard at their writing. They got critiques. They went to writing conferences, made scary appointments with editors or agents, and got rejections. They also kept at it and got better. In doing so, they EARNED the right to be taken seriously by editors and agents.

The basic principle is the same no matter what level you're writing at now: You earn the right to receive big things by doing the best job you possibly can on little things. By outshining the other people who aren't putting out much effort because they don't want to sweat the small stuff.

It always makes me happy to see a new writer in my critique group who is working hard. Early on, their writing is usually pretty lame. That's normal and expected.

What I like to see is a beginner who is less lame every month. And after a year or so, "less lame" no longer applies and "pretty good" starts being appropriate.

That writer is earning the right to get a bit more of my time than the raw beginners. After another year or so, if the writer keeps improving, then "awfully good" might be the right wording. A writer who is "awfully good" has earned the right for me to start making introductions to agents at conferences. I don't do this often. I only do it when the writer deserves it.

If the writer continues to work hard and learns how to effectively present work to editors and agents, then pretty soon those editors and agents will start looking forward to seeing what the writer's got. The writer has now earned the right to be read -- more than just a page or two. That writer has earned the right to have several chapters read, and maybe the whole manuscript.

It continues on like that through your whole career. At every point, you have a certain circle of people who know you and are willing to read your work. If you want to expand that circle, you have to earn that right by becoming better than you are now.

If you have a blog, for example, it's easy to get frustrated because only three people read your blog. You could get angry and quit blogging. You could beg your three blog readers to tell other people about your blog. You could pay big bucks to advertise your blog.

But the smartest thing you could do is to make your blog posts so cool and interesting that your three blog readers will tell other people without you having to beg. That would be earning the right to be heard by someone who isn't your blood relative.

The trouble with all this is that it takes time. Earning the right to be read sounds suspiciously like work. I have bad news. It is work. It's always easier to complain, to do nothing, to quit, to blame somebody, to beg.

Want to market your writing better? Here are some things to think about:

* What are you best at in your writing? Work at doing that even better, because it's the reason people read your work and it's the reason they'll tell other people about it. Try to excel at the aspects of writing for which you have natural talent, because that's your best hope for becoming world-class.

* What are you worst at in your writing? Try to improve it so that it's at least acceptable, because it's the reason people say no when you ask them for their time. But don't try to excel at some aspect of writing for which you have no natural talent.

* Where are you in your writing career? Talk with a more experienced writer about what the next logical step forward is. At each stage in your career, there are new challenges that you'll need to face down in order to move up to that pesky "next level." Don't try to reconquer last year's challenges. Don't try to fight next year's battles. Focus on this year. Don't expect instant success. Expect gradual success.

The fact is that marketing is hard and it's a never-ending journey. There will always be a vast world of potential readers who have never heard of you, or who don't yet care about you.

Your job is to earn the right to be read -- every day, for the rest of your life. That's my job too, and it's the job of every writer. Have fun!

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. I've now gotten half the book written in first-draft and should be done by sometime in July.

I recently posted the latest installment in my monthly humor column. This month's title is "All A-Twitter," in which my plumber Sam discovers an extraordinary way to use Twitter for marketing. Want to see what the mythical Sam did to get hundreds of thousands of Twitter followers? 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>

I'll also be teaching my infamous workshop on "Writing the Male POV" at the American Christian Fiction Writers conference in September. Details here:
<http://www.acfw.com/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 999 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>

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AND make your writing more valuable to editors, AND
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Publisher, Advanced Fiction Writing E-zine
