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The Advanced Fiction Writing E-zine

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

Those of you who have joined in the past month (about
500 of you joined 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
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

In this issue, I'll give you a recap of what we've
talked about in the Advanced Fiction Writing Blog this
past month.

In February, I began a series on creating characters.
That series continues this month with a discussion of
what I believe is the main secret of creating

three-dimensional characters.

Writers do a lot of marketing. But does any of it work? Is anybody listening? How can you know? This month, I'll talk about various tools you can use to figure out how you're doing, and where your efforts are most effective.

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2) Did You Miss These Blog Entries?

My new blog is hopping! Here are some of the topics we've covered in May on the subject of writing:

"Critiquing Mark"--my critique of a two paragraph sample submitted by Mark.

"Thoughts On MRUs"--my answers to some questions on writing MRUs.

"Critiquing Beth"--my critique of Beth's two pararaphs.

"Critiquing John"--the first half of my critique of John's two paragraph entry.

"Critiquing John Again"--the second half of my critique of John's two paragraph entry.

"When Telling Works"--my analysis of when it works to "tell" rather than "show".

"When To Break The Rules"--my comments on a question about how and why you are allowed to break those pesky rules about writing fiction. I also launched a contest to see who could write the best one-sentence summary for their current novel.

"Congratulations To Mary!"--my congratulations to Mary DeMuth for finaling in a major award (winner to be announced in July). I also critiqued her one-sentence summary of her current work-in-progress.

"Best One-Sentence Summary"--My critique of the winner of the one-sentence summary contest. Chris won, with a sentence that seemed almost perfect. I made a couple of suggestions to improve it.

"Notes On The Winning One-Sentence Summary"--some final thoughts on my blog readers' comments about Chris's excellent one-sentence summary.

"Critiquing Alie Again"--I critiqued a one-sentence summary of Alie's current work-in-progress.

"Once More On Alie's Sentence"--I took a shot at revising Alie's one-sentence summary.

"Carrie's One-Liner"--I analyze a one-sentence summary created by Carrie, and explain what makes it a strong summary.

"Let's Do A Contest For Barbara"--I launched a contest for my blog readers to revise Barbara's 38-word one-sentence summary of her work-in-progress. I shaved it down to 20 words and challenged my blog readers to make it even better.

"Barbara Picks A Winner"--announcing the winner of the contest to create the best one-sentence summary of Barbara's work-in-progress. Caprice's 11-word masterpiece won her a free critique by me of a page of her current novel.

"Taming The Email Monster"--my question to my blog readers on their favorite methods of dealing with the flood of email that many of us face.

"Let's Talk About Marketing"--I asked my blog readers to tell me what sort of novels they're working on, how they'd like to market their novels, and whether they need any suggestions from the rest of us.

"How To Market Carrie"--some first thoughts on how one of my blog readers, Carrie, could develop a platform for the novel she's working on about a serial killer and a forensic artist. (Carrie is a forensic artist.)

"Brainstorming For Carrie"--my continuing thoughts on what Carrie could do to write a SuperArticle on her web site.

"Comments on Carrie's SuperArticle"--my concluding thoughts on what Carrie could do to write a SuperArticle.

"On Becoming An Expert"--answers to some questions on how to get published when you are not already a famous expert.

"Answers To Many Questions"--wrapping up the discussion with my answers to a few of the questions that were asked in the preceding week.

"Freshman, Sophomore, Junior, Author"--where are you in your writing career, and what's your biggest obstacle to advancing?

If you'd like to be notified by email whenever I post a new blog entry, enter your email address in the FeedBlitz form on my blog. You'll never miss a blog post again.
My blog is at:
http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com/blog

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3) Creating Characters -- Part 4

In the last few months, we talked about how values,
motivations, and goals define a character in various
ways.

This month, I'd like to talk about one of the most
important points to keep in mind while writing any
character, ESPECIALLY your villain. If you fail to
remember this point, your character runs the risk of
being a "cardboard character."

Here is the point in a nutshell: "Every character
believes he or she is the hero of the story."

When I speak on how to write fiction, I tell my
students that "I can prove that I'm the center of the
universe."

Then I spin around in one spot and . . . the entire
universe revolves around ME.

Oddly enough, however, when YOU spin around in one
spot, you reach the absurd conclusion that the universe
revolves around YOU.

Each of your characters believes the universe revolves
around them--that the novel they are inside is their
story.

PRIDE AND PREJUDICE is the story of Lizzie Bennett. The
entire story focuses on her.

But Mr. Darcy doesn't know that. He thinks it's HIS
story. He can't imagine why Lizzie doesn't understand
what a noble sacrifice he's making in offering marriage
to someone so inferior in social station.

And that pesky Mr. Collins insists on thinking that
it's HIS story. He's a hero, after all, coming to
choose a marriage partner from the very girls who will
be turned out of their estate because he stands to
inherit their home when their father dies. By marrying
one of the Bennett girls, he'll do the family an
everlasting service, and how COULD they be so dull as
to not see that???

Mrs. Bennett, naturally, sees herself as the center of
this story. She's the one who must ensure the futures
of her daughters by making sure they marry well, since
they have not a penny of their own. She is tireless in
pursuit of suitable suitors, despite the unbearable
agony it creates for her "nerves."

As for Mr. Wickham, he thinks he's the hero of the story. He's been treated ill by Darcy, for no good reason. Wickham is just a good red-blooded boy who likes to have a bit of fun. He has thousands of friends who see his good points. Darcy is just a wretched stick in the mud who stops at nothing to force Wickham into poverty.

The list goes on and on.

Bratty sister Lydia, OF COURSE, knows that she's the very heart and soul of the story, since it's all about her.

Mr. Bingley, if he thinks about it at all, must surely be aware that this story is his and his alone--after all, it all starts when he takes a lease on Netherfield Hall.

Lady Catherine knows that this is her story--she's the highest ranking person in the tale; her daughter has been promised to Darcy since infancy; only a conniving and ambitious woman like Elizabeth Bennett would stand in the way of The Way Things Must Be.

Take any character in the story. Each one's behavior springs from his or her belief that "This is MY story."

Unfortunately, too many stories are teeming with cardboard characters.

The definition of a cardboard character is "a character whose behavior is chosen by the author solely to make some other character's story work out in a certain way."

A cardboard villain is bad solely to screw up the life of the hero.

A cardboard clown is goofy solely to add humor to the hero's story.

A cardboard love interest is a man designed to be just right for the heroine.

Whenever you have a cardboard character, the odds are Xtremely high that you put them in to somebody else's story.

The solution is pretty simple. Ask that cardboard character what his or her story OWN story is.

Ask your cardboard villain to explain why he's the good guy and the alleged "hero" is secretly a cad. Then make sure that every action of your villain makes sense according to his measure of the world.

Ask your cardboard clown what's his deepest sorrow. Then write his every scene with full knowledge of how his stupid jokes are a mask for his secret pain.

Ask your cardboard love interest why in the world he should be interested in your heroine, and what's wrong with her from his point of view. Then write his scenes so he's pursuing the girl of his dreams--who may or may not be your heroine.

A novel is a complex braid of a number of different characters, EACH of whom believes he or she is the center of the universe you've created.

That's why Jane Austen's characters breathe. That's why cardboard characters don't.

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4) Measuring Your Marketing

So you've got a web site or a blog and you want to know if all that work is worth anything. Marketing effectiveness is notoriously hard to measure. It's hard to assign a dollar value to a web site. It's harder yet to assign a value to the time you put into it.

Despite all that, there are some things you can measure. There are numbers you can watch to see if they improve over time.

In this column, I'll talk about a FEW of the tools you have to measure your web site or your blog with.

Let's start with your blog, because that's easier. If you have a blog, you should register it on Technorati: http://www.technorati.com

You can set things up so that anytime you post a blog entry, your blog automatically notifies Technorati. When somebody puts you on their blogroll, Technorati knows about it. Technorati digests all that and assigns you two numbers, a "Rank" and an "Authority".

For "Rank," the lower the better. You really would like to be #1, the most popular blog in the world. A Technorati ranking in the top 10000 is a real achievement. At least two of my friends have Technorati rankings around 4000, and I'm seriously impressed by that.

For "Authority," the higher the better. Your "Authority" is just the number of different blogs that have linked to yours in the last 180 days.

If you sign up with FeedBlitz, then you can put a simple form on your site to let people "subscribe" to your blog. They give FeedBlitz their email address, and every time you post a blog, FeedBlitz automatically

sends out a notification to everyone who's subscribed. It's a simple, clean, effective way to keep people updated. You can find out more about FeedBlitz at: http://www.feedblitz.com

Likewise, if you sign up with one of the many feed services, such as FeedBurner, whenever you post a blog entry, the post will be fed to any readers who subscribe to that feed. Your readers don't have to make the rounds of all their favorite blogs. Instead, they can use a reader that collects the feed from all the blogs they subscribe to. You can learn more about FeedBurner here: http://www.feedburner.com

So you can take the pulse of your blog by watching your Rank and your Authority on Technorati, and by keeping tabs on your number of FeedBlitz and FeedBurner subscribers.

That won't tell you anything about your marketing effectiveness. But it will tell you something about your marketing reach, which is a PARTIAL measure of marketing effectiveness.

There's more to the web than blogs, of course. How effective is your web site?

The first place to start is with Alexa. Alexa ranks web sites, and just as with Technorati, lower is better. As of today, Yahoo, MSN, Google, and YouTube are the top 4 ranked sites on Alexa. No surprises there.

Alexa ranks millions of web sites, and it's a real achievement to be in the top 100,000. I know a fair number of authors, who are not ranked in the top million on Alexa.

Alexa actually shows you three different numbers: "Rank," which I've already discussed; "Reach," an estimate of the percentage of global users who visit your site; and "Page Views per User," an estimate of how many pages each visitor to your site actually looks at.

Be aware that Alexa's numbers are highly variable. The problem is that Alexa doesn't actually measure every single visitor to every single site. That would require information they don't have.

What Alexa does is to give away a free toolbar widget. If you install the widget in your web browser, it'll track the sites you go to. The up side of that is that you'll be increasing the Alexa ranking of any sites you visit. The down side is that Alexa knows where you're browsing and that might bother you if you're concerned about privacy. Only you can decide if you want to install the Alexa toolbar.

Note that the Alexa toolbar can only be installed on Windows machines in Internet Explorer 6.0 or higher. You can find out more about Alexa here: http://www.Alexa.com

Because not every has the Alexa toolbar installed, the numbers Alexa gives aren't terribly accurate. But they're a rough guide, and as the months go by, you can see if your site is getting more popular or less.

Another simple measurement you can do is to count the number of incoming links to your site. Google gives you an easy way to do this.

Go to the Google search engine and do this search: links: www.yourdomain.com

Google will return its estimate of the number of sites that link to yours. If you've only got one or two links, then something's wrong. If you've got dozens or hundreds, then Google knows who you are, and it's likely to send traffic your way.

The results of this type of "links search" tend to vary a little bit, but not a lot. If you had 100 incoming links yesterday, you're likely to have about the same number today, plus or minus a couple.

Again, if you watch your links count over time, you'll see if you're gaining or not.

Remember the importance of incoming links. When people do a search on Google, there are usually zillions of different pages related to their search. Google sorts through all those zillions and shows the ten "most relevant" pages. Part of its calculation of "most relevant" is decided by how many incoming links your site has. So "most relevant" really means "most relevant AND most popular".

The exact formula Google uses for deciding this is a closely guarded secret. Tragically, I don't know this formula, nor would I tell you if I did. But it is known that something called "Page Rank" plays a role in the formula.

The exact formula for "Page Rank" is well known, and is related to the number of incoming links to your site. The subject is a bit complicated, and I may decide talk more about it in a future column. The highest possible page rank is 10, and that rank is held by only a very few sites. It's rare for a writer's web site to have a page rank higher than 5.

Finally, you can look at your traffic stats to see how your web site is doing. This should be obvious, and yet most people I know never bother to check their stats.

Most web hosting providers give you at least some level of traffic measurement for your site. I host my sites

on GoDaddy.com, and they provide a "Traffic Facts" service for a small monthly fee that tells me quite a lot about my traffic.

One of the key things to look at is how many page views your site is getting. (You should not care about "hits." The number of "hits" your site gets is not relevant, because every little graphic item on your site might be a "hit.")

What you should care about is how many visitors your site is attracting per day, how many pages they are viewing, and how long they're staying on each page. (A minute or two per page is quite a long time.)

One thing I look at closely is which pages on my site people are actually looking at. Is it my blog? One of my articles? Which articles?

I also look at the phrases people are using to find my site. In recent months, I've noticed that people are searching for "snowflake method" quite a lot. When I see that people are reaching my site by searching on a particular phrase, I might decide to highlight that phrase on my site so as to attract more traffic. Or I might decide to target similar phrases.

I don't recommend that you start obsessing over all these measurements. What I do suggest is that you take a look at them to see what you can learn. How are people using your site? What are they looking for? What are they finding? What are they ignoring? How could you make your site more useful to more people?

That last question is key. The more you focus on making your site as useful as possible to people, the more successful your marketing is going to be.

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5) What's New At AdvancedFictionWriting.com

My Advanced Fiction Writing Blog has been a lot of fun over the last couple of months. I've learned that the knowledge of a group is amazingly larger than the knowledge of an individual. I run my blog so as to encourage lots of comments, and a thriving community has grown up around the blog. You can check it out here: http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com/blog

In other news, my oldest daughter is home from college, and she's working for me, helping me with various administrative and research tasks. She also helps me in creating and formatting new products.

She and I have already released our first joint project, an e-book in which we created an example Snowflake document for the novel GONE WITH THE WIND. You can learn more about that here:
http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com/info/snowflake

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6) Steal This E-zine!

This E-zine is free, and I personally guarantee it's worth at least 1776 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

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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:

Award-winning novelist Randy Ingermanson, "the Snowflake Guy," publishes the Advanced Fiction Writing E-zine, with more than 8000 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.

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Randy Ingermanson
Publisher, Advanced Fiction Writing E-zine

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