The Advanced Fiction Writing E-zine

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"Fiction Writing = Organization + Craft + Marketing"

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What's in This Issue

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

Those of you who have joined in the past month (more than 300 of you 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 at the bottom to let you update your address on my system.

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.

* One of the worst things that happens to writers is losing their data. Does that really happen? How do you prevent it? Find out in my organization column, "The Trouble With Backups."

* What's the hardest part of your job as a novelist? Making stuff up? Or telling the truth? Or are those the same thing? Read my opinion in my craft column, "The Golden Rule of Fiction."

* Every author needs a web site. A popular tool for building web sites is WordPress. Is WordPress right for you? Do you know enough yet to decide? Check out my article, "WordPress Web Sites" to see what I learned in my recent transition.

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2) Organization: The Trouble With Backups

Picture this scenario:

You sit down at your computer, ready to write another
killer scene in your novel. The book is nearly done.
It's a heartbreaking work of staggering genius. This is
the one that's gonna make you a star, baby.

You start up your machine and ...

Nasty clicking sounds come from your hard drive. Harsh
metallic noises.

This is not the happy buzz of a hard drive at peace
with the world.

This is the sound of data dying.

You are aware of every molecule of cold sweat that has
instantly appeared in a thin sheet over your entire
body.

Your brain feels like it's stuffed with cotton.

You cannot breathe.

This can't be happening to you.

This only happens to other people. Bad people. People
who hog two spots in the parking lot. People who are
unkind to cats.

This is happening to you.

You scream.

You say a large number of naughty words.

You kick the wall and slam your head against the doorway repeatedly, promising God that you will be a massively better person for the rest of your life if only he will undo what just happened.

You have lost every word you have ever written.

And it's not fair, because you were going to back up all your data tomorrow.

The trouble with backups is that they don't work unless you actually set them up. And that's a hassle. It could take as much as an hour. It could cost you some money.

The only thing worse than doing backups is ... not doing backups and then wishing you had.

A good backup system needs two elements:

* Continuous backups to an external hard drive on your desk.

* Continuous backups to a secure online backup system on the web.

Why BOTH of those?

An external hard drive on your desk is very fast. You can backup everything on your computer in less than an hour. And you can set up your system to continuously track all changes you make and backup those changes.

The only problem with an external hard drive on your desk is that it can be lost in the same fire or burglary that takes your computer.

A secure online backup system is very safe. It will encrypt data on your hard drive, upload it to a secure location on the internet, and continuously keep the backup up to date.

The only problem with an online backup system is that it is fairly slow. It can take days or weeks for all your data to upload the first time. However, once it's uploaded, it can stay up to date pretty easily.

So you need both. The strengths of an external hard drive make up for the weaknesses of an online backup system, and vice versa.

I wrote an article about backups in this column in March 2011. If you need details on how to set up backups on an external hard drive or how to use an online backup system, I'll refer you to that article, which is titled "Protecting Your Data." You can find all issues of this e-zine archived here: http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com/ezine

If I already covered this two years ago, why am I talking about it again?

Because it's important.

Because a lot of new readers have subscribed to this e-zine in the last two years.

Because if you didn't set up backups then, you still need to do so now.

Can people really lose all their data?

My friend Rachelle Gardner is an agent who writes one of the most widely read blogs in the publishing industry.

Rachelle ran an article recently with a terrifying story that starts out like this:

"I received a panicked email from a client--and this was serious panic. His computer had crashed and died; his external backup was corrupted. His manuscript--the one he'd been writing for months--was due to the publisher in a couple of weeks. And it was GONE."

You can read the rest of Rachelle's article here:

http://www.rachellegardner.com/2013/05/never-never-never-lose-your-work/

After you read this article, you'll know why it's easier and cheaper to set up backups BEFORE you get into trouble, rather than after your system has a horrible crash.

The great thing about backups is that once you set them up, they pretty much take care of themselves.

But the darned things don't set themselves up.

If you haven't done it yet, then do it today.

And sleep well tonight.

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3) Craft: The Golden Rule of Fiction

About twenty years ago, I was accepted into a small mentoring group led by Sol Stein, a famous novelist, playwright, publisher, and writing teacher.

It was a great group and I enjoyed hanging out with so many talented novelists.

Sol had a recent book out, THE BEST REVENGE, and most of us in the group bought a copy.

Sol, knowing that I'm a physicist, autographed mine as follows:

"Physics = facts; Fiction = truth"

I've often thought of that over the years. A fair number of people think that fiction is the opposite of truth -- it's just something made-up that doesn't mean anything.

But Sol was right. Fiction is truth. Good fiction, anyway. It's the truth about people.

My only quibble with Sol was with the first half of his formula. Physics isn't really about facts. Physics is about what lies behind the facts.

Physics is truth, too. It's a different kind of truth than fiction, but it's truth.

The hardest part of fiction is telling the truth.

It's very easy to misrepresent your characters. To fail to tell the whole truth about them. To reduce them to a caricature. But as a novelist, you can't afford to do that.

The problem is that you don't always realize you're doing it. It's one of those things that you don't know that you don't know.

It's easier to see a caricature when you're the one being caricatured. Because when somebody misrepresents YOU, you get angry.

Some examples from the usual fault lines will make this

clear:

If you're a Democrat, then you get irritated when Republicans call you a big-spending, soft-on-crime panderer to the poor.

If you're a Republican, then you get irritated when Democrats call you a militaristic, greed-driven pawn of the big corporations.

If you're pro-choice, then you hate having the pro-lifers painting you as a baby-killer.

If you're pro-life, then you hate having the pro-choicers painting you as a Bible-thumper.

When somebody uses simplistic terms to misrepresent you, it makes you angry. You know good and well that you aren't that way. You know that things are more complicated than that.

Now here's the Golden Rule of Fiction:

Treat your characters the way you want to be treated.

You don't want people misrepresenting you. Don't do it to your characters.

If you intend to tell the truth about your characters, then you have to dive deep into them. You can't settle for a cartoon level understanding. When a character disagrees with you on some deeply held position, you have to play fair with him.

That's hard.

When your character is WRONG about something, when you know he's wrong, when it's plain as day he's wrong,

when you just want to shake him and show him how wrong
he is -- that's when you're in the most danger of not
playing fair.

It's your job to understand your character. Even when
he's wrong.

It's your job to become your character. To be wrong
when you're inside his skin. To believe (if only for a
moment) that he's right.

That's treating your character the way you want to be
treated. It's playing fair.

Remember that only YOU are obligated to play fair. None
of your characters have to. In fact, most of the time
they won't. Most of the time they'll misunderstand each
other. Most of the time, they'll misrepresent each
other. Most of the time, they'll caricature each other.

That creates conflict, and conflict is good.

But when it's just you and your character, alone on the
page, then you have to do your utmost to put yourself
inside her shoes. To see the world from her point of
view, not yours.

Even if she's wrong.

I think that's part of what Sol meant when he said that
fiction is truth.

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4) Marketing: WordPress Web Sites

So you want to build a powerful marketing platform for your writing.

Everyone tells you that you need a web site.

And a blog.

And an e-mail list.

And a Twitter account.

And a Facebook page.

And a Pinterest account.

And a Goodreads account.

And, and, and.

Is all this necessary? How much time, energy, and money are all these things going to suck up? And how do you know if any of them works?

If you're just starting out, relax. Your marketing platform, like Rome, isn't going to get built in a day. Fact is, you'd be truly amazing if you could get it running on all eight cylinders in a year.

You can't do everything at once. You CAN do everything eventually, but you'll get there quickest if you work in a logical order.

So where do you start?

Let me point out the obvious fact that you need some part of your platform that you own. That you control.

You don't own your Twitter account. That lives on the Twitter web site, and they make the rules.

Ditto for Facebook, Pinterest, and Goodreads.

What about your e-mail list? You own it, but it's invisible unless you put a signup box for it on your web site.

What about your blog? That depends. If your blog lives on somebody else's web site, then it could disappear someday. If it lives on your web site, then you own it.

The one thing you own independently of everything else is your web site.

Which is why I think all online marketing should start with a web site. It doesn't have to be big and fancy. But you need a home base that you alone own. A place that everything else can point to.

Ownership of a web site has two parts:

First, you register the domain name (with one of the many companies that provide a service to register your domain). Once you've registered your domain, nobody can take it away from you. You now have a right to put up a web site with that name.

Second, you need to find a place to host the site. You can do that yourself, if you know how. Most authors simply rent space on a web hosting service somewhere. There are many good services out there.

Now, it's POSSIBLE to lose your domain name (for example if your domain name infringes on somebody's trademark) and it's POSSIBLE to lose your web hosting service (for example, if you're running a shady web site).

But for all reasonable purposes, you own your web site.

OK, fine. Let's say you've forked over the ten bucks a year that it costs to register your site. Let's say

you've signed up to pay a monthly fee to host your site on one of the many web hosting providers.

Now what? How do you build the site? Do you have to learn HTML? PHP? CSS? Javascript? Other techie stuff?

No. Ten years ago, many authors bought a software tool (such as Dreamweaver) and rolled their own sites.

You can still do that, as long as you're willing to learn how it all works.

Until recently, that's how I did it.

But the learning curve is steep. The workload is high.

An effective web site needs to do three things well:
* Content
* Graphics
* Technology

As a writer, you're perfect for creating that pesky content. You can drill out words all day, right?

But you may not be very good at graphics. Some writers are. Most aren't. (I'm terrible at graphics.)

And you may not be very good at technology. A few writers are. The great majority aren't. (I'm an experienced programmer with lots of techie skills, but I don't really like web technology -- it just isn't something I enjoy.)

So the problem is to find a way to put together great content, great graphics, and great technology in an affordable package that an author can control.

One solution to that problem is to create a WordPress web site.

WordPress started out as blogging software. Then it got more powerful. For several years now, it's been fairly easy to build a complete web site using WordPress.

It's so easy that the latest estimates are that more than 17% of all web sites are WordPress sites. This percentage is still growing.

What makes WordPress good?

WordPress makes it easy to split out the responsibilities for content, graphics, and technology.

Content: You can assign the content creation task to yourself or any number of other users. Each user has an account name and a password and can create pages or blog posts. You don't need graphics skills or techie skills to create content. You just need word skills.

Graphics: You can use any WordPress theme to manage your graphics and the layout of your pages. Typically, you either buy a ready-made theme or else you hire a graphic designer to create the graphics and then hire a web developer to put the graphics into your site. In principle, you can do either of these yourself, but in practice, most authors don't.

Technology: WordPress has a large number of "plugins" that each give you a small unit of technology. There are plugins to filter spam, manage security, add social media widgets, handle forms, manage e-commerce, and a zillion other tasks. Many plugins are free. Some aren't. Either way, you or your web developer can plug them in and they just work. (In theory, they always work. In practice, they usually work.)

If WordPress is so great, then why aren't all web sites using it?

There are several reasons:

* Many web sites were created before WordPress came along, and the site owners don't want to convert them to WordPress sites because it costs time, energy, and money to do that.

* Some web sites are too big and complex to run well under WordPress. (Amazon, Google, and Apple come to mind as examples.)

* WordPress is easier to use than writing your own web site in Dreamweaver. But it's still not trivial. It takes time and effort to get used to it. Great power, great learning curve, Spiderman.

* As WordPress has become more popular, it's become a larger target for hackers. In April, 2013, hackers launched a major "botnet" attack on WordPress sites all over the world, trying to take them over. The attack went on for several days. It's likely that some WordPress sites were taken over and are now zombie sites waiting to be used for evil.

* WordPress takes ongoing effort to keep up to date. When hackers discover a security flaw in WordPress, every WordPress site on the planet becomes vulnerable. The WordPress team is quick to issue security updates, but web site owners are responsible to update their sites. (You click a button to update your site, but YOU HAVE TO DO IT -- it won't happen on its own.)

* When you update your version of WordPress, your theme or your plugins may now break. If they do, then you have a dilemma. You either revert WordPress to an earlier insecure version, or you have to fix your theme or plugins. But if you didn't write your own theme and plugins, then you may not be able to fix them. So then you have to rely on your theme developer or the developer of your plugins to issue an update. And they don't have to do that.

* Your plugins were written by developers who may or

may not have used best practices. Plugins may introduce security problems into your site. They may have bugs. They may cause your site to slow down.

Bottom line: WordPress sites are cool, but they don't solve all your problems. If you build a WordPress site, you need to be aware of what can go wrong and be prepared. The cheapest solution may not be the best.

Despite those caveats, many web developers believe that the virtues of WordPress make it the best option for small sites.

So what do you do if you MUST have a web site and you decide that WordPress is your best option? I recommend four things:

* Hire a web developer to help you build the site. Preferably a web development TEAM that can give you help in marketing, graphics, and technology. (I think it would be a very rare person who is strong in all three of these.)

* Use a commercial theme that has ongoing support from its developer, so that if it breaks in the future, they'll fix it.

* Use only the plugins you need, and research them to make sure they are high quality plugins.

* Sign up for a security scanning service that probes your site every day for weaknesses and lets you know if it detects a break-in or malware. (This is not cheap, but if security matters to you, then do what you need to do.)

More than a year ago, I decided to make the transition to a new web site for AdvancedFictionWriting.com. My old site had a ton of content. But the graphics were

ugly. The layout of my site was ugly. And I didn't have the techie skills to add in certain cool new technology. I had a WordPress blog, but it was tacked onto the site. I wanted the whole site to be built on WordPress.

So I hired a web development team to help me make the leap. The leader of the team was my friend Thomas Umstattd, a guy I met several years ago at a writing conference. I've listened to him speak about marketing numerous times at conferences and I ALWAYS learn something from him. Thomas runs a company named AuthorMedia that does web sites for authors.

AuthorMedia has redone the sites of several of my friends, and they've done a great job. Thomas really knows marketing. And he has people on his team who specialize in graphics and in technology. I knew I could trust him with my precious site.

Thomas and I had a discussion about what I wanted and how much it would cost. (Be aware that really good web development isn't cheap. I was more interested in excellent quality than a lowball price.)

AuthorMedia sent me their excellent initial questionnaire that they give to all their customers. It forces you to define who you are, what is the purpose of your site, and how you want to present yourself to the world. I breezed through all that.

Then they got to work on my site. And of course there were many more questions they needed me to answer.

I wish I could say I was a great customer who always got back right away with answers to AuthorMedia's questions.

The truth is that I was a pretty difficult customer. For one thing, giving up control is hard for me. For another, I have way too many things going on in my life, even when I'm at home. When I'm traveling, I just

get further behind. So there were weeks at a time when I couldn't get back to AuthorMedia with answers to their questions.

And I have absolutely no graphics sense, so I couldn't even tell them what I wanted my site to look like, other than "Not as ugly as my old site." My writing buddy John Olson eventually had to step in and tell me what I wanted, so I could tell AuthorMedia.

Once the site was mostly done, I wanted all sorts of changes done. And then undone. And then redone.

I also set up daily security scanning with McAfee (expensive) and with Sucuri (inexpensive). I wanted to do everything in my power to keep my web site a good citizen on the Internet.

When we were ready to launch, Thomas and I spent some time looking for a high-performance web hosting provider. We found a new one that looked excellent on paper. In practice, not so much. The hosting service had a problem that was impossible to detect before we launched.

After the launch, we had to make a quick move to a different hosting service. The AuthorMedia team helped me make that move a lot quicker than I thought was possible.

The good news is that the new site is done and it looks a lot better than the old one. If you haven't dropped by lately, have a look:
http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com

Kudos to AuthorMedia for doing excellent work for a difficult customer. You can check them out here:
http://www.AuthorMedia.com

WordPress is not the only way to create a web site. It has pluses and minuses. But it's a good, sound solution

that's popular with authors.

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5) What's New At AdvancedFictionWriting.com

The new version of AdvancedFictionWriting.com is done
and I'm extremely happy with it.

Ditto for my personal web site at Ingermanson.com.

I'm still working on a new edition of my novel DOUBLE
VISION, to be released in e-book format. Now that my
web sites are done, I can focus on that, at last.

My book, WRITING FICTION FOR DUMMIES, has been selling
well since it began shipping more than three years ago.
For the last couple of years, it's been the hottest
selling book in its category in the Kindle store.

You can find out all about WRITING FICTION FOR DUMMIES
here:

http://www.advancedfictionwriting.com/product/writing-fiction-for-
dummies/

If you've already bought the book and like it, I'd be
delighted if you went to your favorite online bookstore
and posted a review.

I've also been gratified at the response to my flagship
software product, "Snowflake Pro," which makes it fast,
easy, and fun to work through the steps of my wildly
popular Snowflake method for designing a novel. You can
find out more about Snowflake Pro at:

http://www.SnowflakeProSoftware.com

I normally teach at four to six writing conferences per year. This year, I'm easing off some -- I'm currently booked to teach at only two in 2013, which should give me a bit of breathing room.

Why don't I teach at more conferences? Because teaching is an incredibly demanding blood sport and it sucks a huge amount of energy out of my tiny brain. I prefer to put my absolute best into a few locations than to muddle through at many.

I've already taught once this year, so I have only one more to go.

I will be teaching a six-hour class on marketing for writers at the Oregon Christian Writers Conference in Portland. Details here:
http://ocwsummerconference.com/

I'll also be attending the ACFW conference in September and the Novelist, Inc. conference in October.

If you'd like me to teach at your conference in 2014 or beyond, 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/products/

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6) Randy Recommends . . .

I don't take paid ads for this e-zine. I do, however, recommend people I like.

I'm a huge fan of Margie Lawson's courses, both the ones she teaches in person and the ones she sells on her web site at
http://www.MargieLawson.com

Margie is a psychologist who applies what she knows about human psychology to writing fiction. I believe her material is brilliant. Check her out on her web site!

I've also become a fan of Thomas Umstattd's terrific uncommon-sense thoughts on internet marketing. You can read Thomas's blog at:
http://www.AuthorMedia.com/blog

Since I already gave a big plug to Thomas and his crew at AuthorMedia earlier in this e-zine, I won't repeat myself here.

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7) Steal This E-zine!

This E-zine is free, and I personally guarantee it's worth at least 1321 times the price. I invite you to

"steal" it, but only if you do it nicely . . .

Extremely tasteful postscript: I encourage you to e-mail this E-zine to any fiction writer friends of yours who might benefit from it. I only ask that you e-mail 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.

Of course you should not forward this e-mail to people who don't write fiction. They won't care about it.

At the moment, there is one place to subscribe:
http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com

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This article is reprinted by permission of the author.

Award-winning novelist Randy Ingermanson, "the Snowflake Guy," publishes the free monthly Advanced Fiction Writing E-zine, with more than 32,000 readers. 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
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